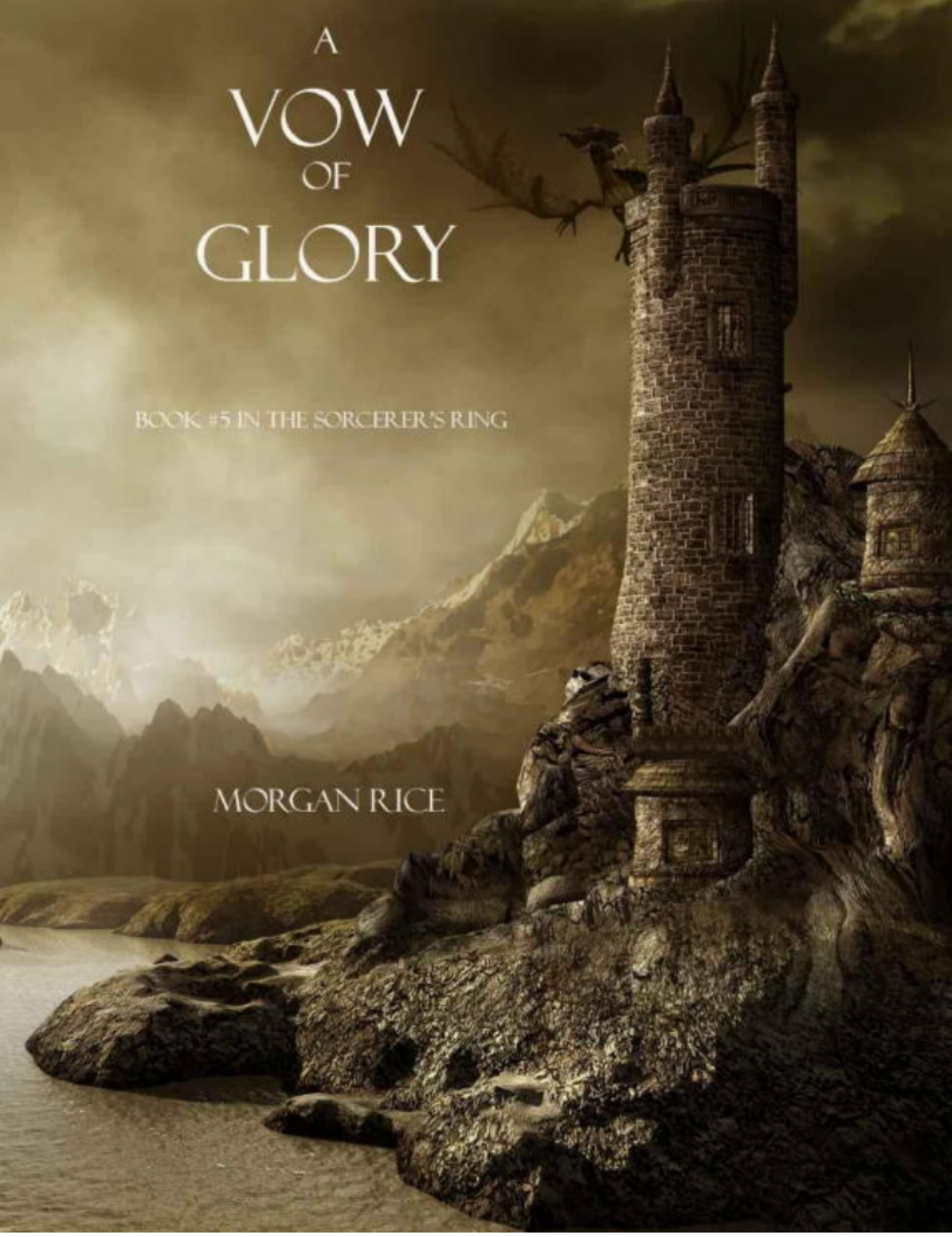
A
VOW
OF
GLORY
BOOK #5 IN THE SORCERER'S RING
MORGAN RICE

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IT

Annotation

> "A breathtaking new epic fantasy series. Morgan Rice does it again! This magical sorcery saga reminds me of the best of J.K. Rowling, George R.R. Martin, Rick Riordan, Christopher Paolini and J.R.R. Tolkien. I couldn't put it down!"
>
> *—Allegra Skye, bestselling author of SAVED*

In A VOW OF GLORY (Book #5 in the Sorcerer's Ring), Thor embarks with his Legion friends on an epic quest into the vast wilds of the Empire to try to find the ancient Destiny Sword and save the Ring. Thor's friendships deepen, as they journey to new places, face unexpected monsters and fight side by side in unimaginable battle. They encounter exotic lands, creatures and peoples beyond which they could have ever imagined, each step of their journey fraught with increasing danger. They will have to summon all their skills if they are to survive as they follow the trail of the thieves, deeper and deeper into the Empire. Their quest will bring them all the way into the heart of the Underworld, one of the seven realms of hell, where the undead rule and fields are lined with bones. As Thor must summon his powers, more than ever, he struggles to understand the nature of who he is.

Back in the Ring, Gwendolyn must lead half of King's Court to the Western stronghold of Silesia, an ancient city perched on the edge of the Canyon that has stood for one thousand years. Silesia's fortifications have allowed it to survive every attack throughout every century—but it has never been faced with an assault by a leader like Andronicus, by an army like his million men. Gwendolyn learns what it means to be queen as she takes on a leadership role, Srog, Kolk, Brom, Steffen, Kendrick and Godfrey by her side, preparing to defend the city for the massive war to come.

Meanwhile, Gareth is descending deeper into madness, trying to fend off a coup that would have him assassinated in King's Court, while Erec fights for his life to save his love, Alistair and the Duke's city of Savaria as the downed shield enables the wild creatures to invade. And Godfrey, wallowing in drink, will have to decide if he is ready to cast off his past and become the man his family expects him to be.

As they all fight for their lives and as things seem as if they can't get any worse, the story ends with two shocking twists.

Will Gwendolyn survive the assault? Will Thor survive the

Empire? Will the Destiny Sword be found?

With its sophisticated world-building and characterization, A VOW OF GLORY is an epic tale of friends and lovers, of rivals and suitors, of knights and dragons, of intrigues and political machinations, of coming of age, of broken hearts, of deception, ambition and betrayal. It is a tale of honor and courage, of fate and destiny, of sorcery. It is a fantasy that brings us into a world we will never forget, and which will appeal to all ages and genders. It is 75,000 words.

- Morgan Rice
  - CHAPTER ONE
  - CHAPTER TWO
  - CHAPTER THREE
  - CHAPTER FOUR
  - CHAPTER FIVE
  - CHAPTER SIX
  - CHAPTER SEVEN
  - CHAPTER EIGHT
  - CHAPTER NINE
  - CHAPTER TEN
  - CHAPTER ELEVEN
  - CHAPTER TWELVE
  - CHAPTER THIRTEEN
  - CHAPTER FOURTEEN
  - CHAPTER FIFTEEN
  - CHAPTER SIXTEEN
  - CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
  - CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
  - CHAPTER NINETEEN
  - CHAPTER TWENTY
  - CHAPTER TWENTY ONE
  - CHAPTER TWENTY TWO
  - CHAPTER TWENTY THREE
  - CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR
  - CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE
  - CHAPTER TWENTY SIX
  - CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN
  - CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT
  - About Morgan Rice
  - Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice
  - Books by Morgan Rice
  - COMING SOON….
  - Copyright

Morgan Rice
A VOW OF GLORY

"Life every man holds dear; but the dear man holds honor far more precious dear than life."

—William Shakespeare

Troilus and Cressida

CHAPTER ONE

Andronicus rode proudly down the center of McCloud's royal city, flanked by hundreds of his generals, and dragging behind him his most prized possession: King McCloud. Stripped of his armor, half-naked, his hairy body rolling with fat, King McCloud was bound by ropes and tied to the back of Andronicus' saddle by a long rope circling his wrists.

As Andronicus rode slowly, reveling in his triumph, he dragged McCloud through the streets, over dirt and pebbles, stirring up a cloud of dust. McCloud's people gathered and gaped. He could hear McCloud calling out, writhing in pain as he paraded him through the streets of his own city. Andronicus beamed. The faces of McCloud's people crumpled in fear. Here was their former king, now the lowliest of slaves. It was one of the finest days Andronicus could remember.

Andronicus was surprised at how easy it had been to take McCloud's city. It seemed as if McCloud's men had been demoralized before the attack had even begun. Andronicus's men had conquered them in a blaze of lightning, his thousands of soldiers swooping in, overriding the few soldiers who dared to defend, and swarming the city in the blink of an eye. They must have realized there was no point in resisting. They had all laid down their arms assuming, if they surrendered, Andronicus would take them captive.

But they did not know the great Andronicus. He despised surrender. He took no captives, and their lowering their weapons just made it all the easier for him.

The streets of McCloud's city ran with blood, as Andronicus' men swept every alley, every side street, butchering every man they could find. The women and children he had taken as slaves, as he always did. The houses they looted, one at a time.

As Andronicus rode now, slowly through the streets, surveying his triumph, he saw the corpses everywhere, the heaps of loot, the destroyed homes. He turned and nodded to one of his generals, and immediately the general raised a torch high, motioned to his men, and hundreds of them fanned throughout the city and set fire to the thatched roofs. Flames rose up all around them, reaching for the sky, and Andronicus could already begin to feel the heat from here.

"NO!" McCloud screamed, flailing on the ground behind him.

Andronicus grinned wider and picked up his pace, aiming for a particularly large rock; there came a satisfying thump, and he knew McCloud's body had ridden over it.

Andronicus took great satisfaction in watching this city burn. As he had in every conquered city in his Empire, he would first raze the

city to the ground, then build it up again, with his own men, his own generals, his own Empire. That was his way. He wanted no trace of the old. He was building a new world. The world of Andronicus.

The Ring, the sacred Ring which had eluded all of his ancestors, was now his territory. He could hardly conceive it. He breathed deeply, wondering just how great he was. Soon enough, he would cross the Highlands, and conquer the other half of the Ring, too. Then there would be no place left on the planet upon which his foot had not tread.

Andronicus rode up to the towering statue of McCloud, in the city square, and stopped before it. It stood there like a shrine, rising fifty feet, made of marble. It showed a version of McCloud that Andronicus did not recognize, a young, fit, muscular McCloud, wielding a sword proudly. It was egomaniacal. For that, Andronicus admired him. A part of him wanted to take it back home, install it in his palace as a trophy.

But another part of him was too disgusted by it. Without thinking, he reached down, took out his sling, a sling three times larger than that of any human, large enough to hold a rock the size of a small boulder, and he reached back and hurled it with all that he had.

The small boulder flew through the air and connected with the head of the statue. McCloud's marble head shattered in pieces, exploding off the body. Andronicus then let out a shout, raised his two-handed flail, charged and swung with all he had.

Andronicus smashed the statue's torso and the marble toppled, then crashed to the ground, shattering with a great noise. Andronicus turned his horse and made sure, as he rode, that McCloud's body was scraped up over the shards.

"You will pay for that!" an agonized McCloud cried weakly.

Andronicus laughed. He had encountered many humans in his lifetime, but this one might just be the most pathetic of them all.

"Will I?" Andronicus yelled.

This McCloud was too thick-headed; he still did not appreciate the might of the great Andronicus. He would have to be taught, once and for all.

Andronicus scanned the city, and his eyes fell on what was surely McCloud's castle. He kicked his horse and took off at a gallop, his men falling in behind him, as he dragged McCloud across the dusty courtyard.

Andronicus rode up the dozens of marble steps, McCloud's body thumping behind him, calling out and groaning with each step, then he continued to ride, right up through the marble entrance. Andronicus' men were already standing guard at the doors, at their feet the bloody corpses of McCloud's former guards. Andronicus

grinned with satisfaction to see that already, every corner of the city was his.

Andronicus continued riding, right through the vast castle doors, inside a corridor of soaring arched ceilings, all made of marble. He marveled at the excess of this McCloud king. He clearly had spared no expense in indulging himself.

Now his day had come. Andronicus continue to ride with his men down the wide corridors, the horses' hooves echoing off the walls, to what was clearly McCloud's throne room. He burst through the oak doors and rode right to the center of the room, to an obscene throne, carved of gold, sitting in the center of the chamber.

Andronicus dismounted, climbed the golden steps slowly, and sat in it.

He breathed deeply as he turned and surveyed his men, his dozens of generals seated on horseback awaiting his command. He looked over at the bloody McCloud, still tied to his horse, groaning. He surveyed this room, examined the walls, the banners, the armor, the weaponry. He looked down at the workmanship of this throne, and he admired it. He considered melting it down, or perhaps bringing it back for himself. Maybe he would give it to one of his lesser generals. Of course, this throne was still nothing next to Andronicus' own throne, the most massive throne of all the kingdoms, one which had taken twenty laborers forty years to build. The building of it had begun in his father's lifetime, and had been completed on the day Andronicus had murdered his own father. It had been perfect timing.

Andronicus looked down at McCloud, this pathetic little human, and wondered how best to make him suffer. He examined the shape and size of his skull, and decided that he would like to shrink it and wear it on his necklace, with the other shrunken heads around his neck. Yet Andronicus realized that before he killed him, he would need some time to thin out his face, his cheekbones, so that it looked better around his neck. He did not want a fat, plump face ruining the aesthetic of his necklace. He would let him live a while, and torture him in the meantime. He smiled to himself. Yes, it was a very good plan.

"Bring him to me," Andronicus commanded one of his generals, in his ancient, deep snarl.

He jumped down without a moment's hesitation, hurried over to McCloud, cut the rope, and dragged the bloody body across the floor, staining it red as he went. He dropped it at the base of Andronicus' feet.

"You can't get away with this!" McCloud mumbled weakly.

Andronicus shook his head; this human would never learn.

"Here I am, seated on your throne," Andronicus said. "And there

you are, lying at my feet. I should think it is safe to say that I can get away with anything I want. And that I already have."

McCloud lay there, moaning and writhing.

"My first order of business," Andronicus said, "will be to have you pay the proper respect to your new king and master. Come to me now, and have the honor of being the first to kneel before me in my new kingdom, the first to kiss my hand and call me King of what was once the McCloud side of the Ring."

McCloud looked up, got to his hands and knees, and sneered at Andronicus

"Never!" he said, and turned and spat on the floor.

Andronicus leaned back and laughed. He was heartily enjoying this. He had not met a human this willful for quite some time.

Andronicus turned and nodded, and one of his men grabbed McCloud from behind, while another came forward and held his head still. A third came forward with a long razor. As he approached, McCloud buckled in fear.

"What are you doing?" McCloud asked in panic, his voice several octaves higher.

The man reached down and quickly shaved off half of McCloud's beard. McCloud looked up in bewilderment, clearly baffled that the man had not hurt him.

Andronicus nodded, and another man stepped forward with a long poker, at the end of which was carved in iron the emblem of Andronicus' kingdom—a lion with a bird in its mouth. It glowed orange, steaming hot, and as the others held McCloud down, the man lowered the poker for his now-bare cheek.

"NO!" McCloud shrieked, realizing.

But it was too late.

A horrific shriek cut through the air, accompanied by a hissing noise and the smell of burnt flesh. Andronicus watched with glee as the poker burned deeper and deeper into McCloud's cheek. The hissing grew louder, the screams almost intolerable.

Finally, after a good ten seconds, they dropped McCloud.

McCloud slumped to the ground, unconscious, drooling, as smoke rose up from half of his face. It now bore the emblem of Andronicus, burned into his flesh.

Andronicus leaned forward, looked down at the unconscious McCloud, and admired the handiwork.

"Welcome to the Empire."

CHAPTER TWO

Erec stood atop the hill at the forest's edge and watched the small army approach, and his heart filled with fire. He was born for a day like this. In some battles, the line blurred between just and unjust—but not on this day. The Lord from Baluster had stolen his bride unashamedly, and had been boastful and unapologetic. He had been made aware of his crime, had been given a chance to make wrongs right, and he had refused to rectify his errors. He had brought his woes upon himself. His men should have let it alone—especially now that he was dead.

But there they rode, hundreds of them, paid mercenaries to this lesser lord—all bent on killing Erec solely because they had been paid by this man. They charged towards them in their shiny green armor, and as they neared they let out a battle cry. As if that might scare him.

Erec was unafraid. He had seen too many battles like this. If he had learned anything in all his years of training, it was to never fear when he fought on the side of the just. Justice, he was taught, may not always prevail—but it gave its bearer the strength of ten men.

It was not fear Erec felt as he saw the hundreds of men approach, and knew he would likely die on this day. It was expectation. He had been given a chance to meet his death in the most honorable way, and that was a gift. He had taken a vow of glory, and today, his vow was demanding its due.

Erec drew his sword and charged down the slope on foot, sprinting for the army as it charged him. At this moment he wished more than ever that he had his trusted horse, Warkfin, to ride with into battle—but he felt a sense of peace knowing that he was brining Alistair back to Savaria, to the safety of the Duke's court.

As he neared the soldiers, hardly fifty yards away, Erec picked up speed, sprinting for the lead knight in the center. They did not slow, and neither did he, and he braced himself for the clash to come.

Erec knew he had one advantage: three hundred men could not physically fit close enough to all attack one man at the same time; he knew from his training that at most six men on horseback could get close enough to attack a man at once. The way Erec saw it, that meant his odds were not three hundred to one—but only six to one. As long as he could kill the six men in front of him at all times, he had a chance to win. It was just a matter of whether he had the stamina to make it through.

As Erec charged down the hill, he drew from his waist the one weapon he knew would be best: a flail with a chain twenty yards long, at the end of which sat a spiked, metal ball. It was a weapon meant

for laying a trap on the road—or for a situation just like this.

Erec waited until the last moment, until the army did not have time to react, then spun the flail high overhead and hurled it across the battlefield. He aimed for a small tree, and the spiked chain spread out across the battlefield; as the ball wrapped around it, Erec tucked into a role and hit the ground, avoiding the spears about to be hurled at him, and held on to the shaft with all his might.

He timed it perfectly: there was no time for the army to react. They saw it at the last second and tried to pull up on their horses—but they were going too fast, and there wasn't time.

The entire front line ran into it, the spiked chain cutting through all the horses' legs, sending the riders falling face-first down to the ground, the horses landing on top of them. Dozens of them were crushed in the chaos.

Erec had no time to be proud of the damage he had done: another flank of the army turned and bore down on him, charging with a battle cry, and Erec rolled to his feet to meet them.

As the lead knight raised a javelin, Erec took advantage of what he had: he did not have a horse, and could not meet these men at their height, but since he was low, he could use the ground beneath him. Erec suddenly dove down to the ground, tucked into a role, and raised his sword and sliced off the legs of the man's horse. The horse buckled and the soldier did a face plant before he had a chance to let go of his weapon.

Erec continued to roll, and managed to miss the stampeding feet of the horses around him, who had to part ways to avoid running into the downed horse. Many did not succeed, tripping over the dead animal, and dozens more horses crashed down to the ground, raising a cloud of dust and causing a logjam amongst the army.

It was exactly what Erec had hoped for: there was dust and confusion, dozens more falling to the ground.

Erec jumped to his feet, raised his sword and blocked a sword coming down for his head. He spun and blocked a javelin, then a lance, then an axe. He defended the blows that poured down on him from all sides, but knew he could not keep this up forever. He had to be on the attack if he were to stand any chance.

Erec tucked into a role, came out of it, took a knee, and hurled his sword as if it were a spear. It flew through the air and into the chest of his closest attacker; his eyes opened wide and he fell sideways, dead, off his horse.

Erec took the opportunity to jump onto the man's horse, snatching his flail from his hands before he died. It was a fine flail, and Erec had singled him out for this reason; it had a long, studded silver shaft and a four-foot chain, with three spiked balls at the end of

it. Erec pulled back and swung it high overhead, and smashed the weapons from the hands of several opponents at once; then he swung again and knocked them from their horses.

Erec surveyed the battlefield and saw that he had done considerable damage, with nearly a hundred knights downed. But the others, at least two hundred of them, were regrouping and charging him now—and they were all determined.

Erec rode out to meet them, one man charging two hundred, and raised a great battle cry of his own, raising his flail ever higher, and praying to God that his strength would only hold.

* * *

Alistair cried as she held onto Warkfin with all her might, the horse galloping, taking her down the too-familiar road to Savaria. She had been screaming and kicking at the beast the whole way, trying with everything she had to get it to turn around, to ride back to Erec. But it would not listen. She had never encountered any horse like this one before—it listened unwaveringly to its master's command, and would not waver. Clearly, it was set on bringing her exactly where Erec had commanded it to—and she finally resigned herself to the fact that there was nothing she could do about it.

Alistair had mixed feelings as she rode back through the city gates, a city in which she had lived so long as an indentured servant. On the one hand, it felt familiar—but on the other, it brought back memories of the innkeeper who had oppressed her, of everything that was wrong about this place. She had so looked forward to moving on, to moving out of here with Erec and beginning a new life over with him. While she felt safe within its gates, she also felt an increasing foreboding for Erec, out there alone, facing that army. The thought of it made her sick.

Realizing that Warkfin would not turn around, she knew her next best bet was to get help for Erec. Erec had asked her to stay here, within the safety of these gates—but that was the last thing she would ever do. She was a king's daughter, after all, and she was not one to run from fear or from confrontation. Erec had found his match in her: she was as noble and as determined as he. And there was no way she would ever live with herself if anything happened to him back there.

Knowing this royal city well, Alistair directed Warkfin to the Duke's castle—and now that they were within the gates, the animal listened. She rode to the castle entrance, dismounted, and ran past the attendants who tried to stop her. She brushed off their arms and raced down the marble corridors she had learned so well as a servant.

Alistair put her shoulders into the large royal doors to the chamber hall, crashed them open, and barged into the Duke's private chamber.

Several council members turned to look at her, all wearing royal robes, the Duke seated in the center with several knights around him. They all wore astonished expressions; she had clearly interrupted some important business.

"Who are you, woman?" one called out.

"Who dares interrupt the Duke's official business?" another yelled.

"I recognize the woman," the Duke said, standing.

"As do I," said Brandt, the one she recognized as Erec's friend.

"It is Alistair, is it not?" he asked. "Erec's new wife?"

She ran towards him, in tears, and clasped his hands.

"Please, my lord, help me. It is Erec!"

"What has happened?" the Duke asked, alarmed.

"He lies in grave danger. Even now he faces a hostile army alone! He would not let me stay behind. Please! He needs help!"

Without a word, all the knights jumped to their feet and began to run from the hall, not one of them hesitating; she turned and ran with them.

"Stay here!" Brandt exhorted.

"Never!" she said, running behind him. "I will lead you to him!"

They all ran as one down the corridors, out the castle doors and to a large group of waiting horses, each mounting theirs without a moment's hesitation. Alistair jumped on Warkfin, kicked, and led the group, as anxious to go as the rest of them.

As they charged through the Duke's court, soldiers all around them began to mount horses and join them—and by the time they left the gates of Savaria, they were accompanied by a large and growing contingent of at least a hundred men, Alistair riding in front, beside Brandt and the Duke.

"If Erec finds out that you ride with us, it will be my head," Brandt said, riding beside her. "Please, just tell us where he is, my lady."

But Alistair shook her head doggedly, pushing back tears as she rode harder, the great rumble of all these men around her.

"I would rather go down to my grave than abandon Erec!"

CHAPTER THREE

Thor rode warily on the forest trail, Reece, O'Connor, Elden and the twins on horseback beside him, Krohn at his heels, as they all emerged from the forest on the far side of the Canyon. Thor's heart beat faster in anticipation as they finally reached the perimeter of the thick wood. He raised a hand, motioning for the others to be silent, and they all froze beside him.

Thor looked out and surveyed the great expanse of beach, of open sky, and beyond it, the vast yellow sea that would take them to the distant lands of the Empire. The Tartuvian. Thor hadn't seen its waters since their journey to The Hundred. It felt odd to be back again—and this time, with a mission that held the fate of the Ring at stake.

After crossing the Canyon bridge, their short ride through the forest in the Wilds had been uneventful. Thor had been instructed by Kolk and Brom to look for a small boat moored on the shores of the Tartuvian, carefully hidden beneath the branches of an immense tree which hung over the sea. Thor followed their directions exactly, and as they reached the wood's perimeter, he spotted the boat, well-hidden, ready to take them where they needed to go. He was relieved.

But he then spotted six Empire troops, standing on the sand before the boat, inspecting it. Another troop had climbed up onto the boat, docked partly on the beach, rocking in the gently lapping waves. There was supposed to be no one here. Somehow, the boat had been discovered.

It was a stroke of bad luck. As Thor looked farther out at the horizon, he saw the distant outline of what appeared to be the entire Empire fleet, thousands of blacks ships, sailing the black flags of the Empire. Luckily they did not sail for Thor, but in a different direction, taking the long, circular course to bring them around the Ring, to the McCloud side, where they had breached the Canyon. Luckily, their fleet was preoccupied with a different route.

Except for this one patrol. These six Empire soldiers, probably scouts on a routine mission, somehow must have stumbled upon this Legion ship. It was bad timing. If Thor and the others had just reached the ship a few minutes earlier, they probably would have already boarded it and shoved off. Now, they had a confrontation on their hands. There was no way around it.

Thor looked up and down the beach and saw no other contingents of Empire troops. At least that was in their favor. It was probably a lone patrol group.

"I thought the boat was supposed to be well-hidden," O'Connor said.

“Apparently not enough,” Elden remarked.

The six of them sat on their horses, staring at the boat and the group of soldiers.

“It won’t be long until they alert other Empire troops,” Conven observed.

“And then we’ll have an all-out war on our hands,” added Conval.

Thor knew they were right. And that it was not a chance they could take.

“O’Connor,” Thor said, “your aim is the best of the bunch. I’ve seen you hit from fifty yards out. See that one on the bow? We’ve got one shot at this. Can you do it?”

O’Connor nodded gravely, his eyes fixed on the Empire soldiers. He reached deliberately over his shoulder, lifted his bow, placed an arrow, and held it at the ready.

They all were looking to Thor, and he felt ready to lead.

“O’Connor, on my signal, fire. Then we’ll charge for the ones below. Everyone else, use your throwing weapons as we get close. Try to get as close as you can first.”

Thor motioned with his hand, and suddenly, O’Connor released the string.

The arrow sailed through the air with a whooshing noise, and it was a perfect shot, its metal tip piercing the heart of the Empire soldier on the bow. The soldier stood there, his eyes opening wide for a moment, as if he did not understand what was happening, then he suddenly stretched his arms out wide and fell forward, face-first, in a swan dive, landing with a splat on the beach at the feet of his fellow soldiers, the sand staining red.

Thor and the others charged, a well-oiled machine in sync with each other. The sound of their horses’ galloping gave them away, and the six other soldiers turned and faced them. The soldiers mounted their horses and charged back, preparing to meet them in the middle.

Thor and his men still had the advantage of surprise. Thor reached back and hurled a stone with his sling and hit one of them in the temple from twenty yards away as he was in the midst of mounting his horse. He fell back off of it, dead, the reigns still in his hands.

As they neared, Reece threw his axe, Elden his spear, and the twins each their daggers. The sands were uneven and the horses slipped, making throwing the weapons harder than usual. Reece’s axe found its mark, killing one of them, but the others missed.

That left four of them. The lead one broke out from the group, charging right for Reece, who was weaponless; he had cast his axe but not had time to draw his sword yet. Reece braced himself, and at the last second Krohn leapt forward, bit the soldier’s horse in the leg, and

the horse collapsed, its rider falling down to the ground and sparing Reece at the last moment.

Reece drew his sword and stabbed the soldier, killing him before he could regain his feet.

That left three. One of them came for Elden with an axe, swinging for his head; Elden blocked it with his shield, and in the same motion swung his sword and chopped the axe handle in half. Elden then swung around with his shield and smashed the attacker in the side of the head, knocking him from his horse.

Another soldier pulled a flail from his waist and swung its long chain, the spiked end suddenly coming down for O'Connor. It happened too fast, and there was no time for O'Connor to react.

Thor saw it coming and charged forward, to his friend's side, raised his sword and slashed the chain of the flail, before it hit O'Connor. There came the sound of sword cutting through iron, Thor marveling at how sharp his new sword was. The spiked ball went flying down harmlessly to the ground, lodging in the sand, saving O'Connor's life. Conval then rode up and stabbed the soldier with a spear, killing him.

The final Empire soldier saw he was badly outnumbered; fear in his eyes, he suddenly turned and took off, racing down shore, his horse's prints leaving deep impressions in the sand.

They all set their sights on the retreating soldier: Thor hurled a stone with his sling, O'Connor raised his bow and fired, and Reece hurled a spear. But the soldier rode too erratically, the horse dipping in the sand, and they all missed.

Elden drew his sword and Thor could see that he was about to charge after him. Thor held out a hand and motioned for him to stay put.

"Don't!" Thor screamed.

Elden turned and looked at him.

"If he lives, he will send others after us!" Elden protested.

Thor turned and looked back at the boat, and knew it would take precious time to hunt him down—time they could not afford.

"The Empire will come after us no matter what," Thor said. "We haven't time to lose. What is most important now is that we get far from here. To the ship!"

They dismounted as they reached the ship and Thor reached into his saddle and began to empty it of all its provisions as the others did the same, loading up on weapons and on sacks of food and water. Who knew how long the ship ride would take, how long it would be until they saw land again—*if* they saw land again. Thor also loaded up on food for Krohn.

They threw the sacks up high over the railing of the boat, landing

on the deck above with a thump.

Thor grabbed the thick, knotted rope hanging over the side, the coarse rope cutting into his hands, and tested it. He draped Krohn over his shoulder, the weight of them both testing his muscles, and pulled up towards the deck. Krohn whined in his ear, hugging his chest with his sharp claws, clinging to him.

Soon Thor was over the railing, Krohn leaping off of him onto the deck—and the others following close behind. Thor leaned over and looked down at the horses on the beach, looking up as if awaiting a command.

"And what of them?" Reece asked, coming up beside him.

Thor turned and surveyed the boat: it was maybe twenty feet long and half as wide. It was big enough for the seven of them—but not for their horses. If they tried to take them, the horses might trample the wood, damage the boat. They had to leave them behind.

"We have no choice," Thor said, looking down longingly at them. "We'll have to find new ones."

O'Connor leaned over the rail.

"They're smart horses," O'Connor said. "I trained them well. They will return home upon my command."

O'Connor whistled sharply.

As one, the horses turned and bolted, racing across the sand and disappearing into the forest, heading back towards the Ring.

Thor turned and looked at his brothers, at the ship, at the sea before them. Now they were stranded, with no horses, with no choice but to move forward. Reality was sinking in. They were truly alone, with nothing but this boat, and about to part from the shores of the Ring for good. Now there was no turning back.

"And how are we supposed to get this boat into the water?" Conval asked, as they all looked down, fifteen feet below, at the hull of the boat. A small portion of it was in the lapping waves of the Tartuvian, but most of it was lodged firmly in the sand.

"Over here!" Conven said.

They hurried to the other side of the boat and there was a thick iron chain dangling over the edge, at the bottom of which was an immense iron ball, sitting on the sand.

Conven reached down and yanked on the chain. He groaned and struggled, but could not lift it.

"It's too heavy," he grunted.

Conval and Thor hurried over and helped, and as the three of them grabbed the chain and pulled, Thor was shocked by its weight: even with the three of them pulling, they could only lift it a few feet. Finally, they all dropped it, and it fell back down to the sand.

"Let me help," Elden said, stepping forward.

With his huge bulk, Elden towered over them, and he reached down by himself and yanked on the chain, and managed to lift the ball into the air alone. Thor was amazed. The others jumped in and they all pulled, as one, yanking the anchor up one foot at a time, and finally over the railing and onto the deck.

The boat started to move, rocking a little bit in the waves, but it was still lodged in the sand.

"The polls!" Reece said.

Thor turned and saw two wooden poles, nearly twenty feet long, mounted along the sides of the boat, and he realized what they were for. He ran over with Reece and grabbed one, while Conval and Conven grabbed the other.

"When we shove off," Thor screamed out, "you all raise the sails!"

They leaned over and jabbed the poles into the sand and pushed with all their might; Thor groaned from the effort. Slowly, the boat began to move, just the tiniest bit. At the same time, Elden and O'Connor ran to the middle of the boat and pulled the ropes to raise the canvas sails, raising them with effort, one foot at a time. Luckily there was a strong breeze, and as Thor and the others shoved and shoved against the shore, struggling with all they had to get this surprisingly heavy boat out of the sand, the sails raised higher, and began to catch the wind.

Finally, the boat rocked beneath them as it glided out onto the water, bobbing, weightless, Thor's shoulders shaking from the effort. Elden and O'Connor raised the sails to full mast, and soon they were drifting out to sea.

They all let out a cheer of triumph, as they put the polls back in place and ran over and helped Elden and O'Connor secure the lines. Krohn yelped beside them, excited by it all.

The boat was drifting aimlessly and Thor hurried to the wheel, O'Connor beside him.

"Want to take the wheel?" Thor asked O'Connor.

O'Connor grinned wide.

"Would love to."

They began to gain real speed, cruising out on the yellow waters of the Tartuvian, the wind at their backs. Finally, they were moving, and Thor took a deep breath. They were off.

Thor headed out to the bow, Reece beside him, and Krohn came up between them, and leaned into Thor's leg, while Thor reached down and stroked his soft white fur. Krohn leaned over and licked Thor, and Thor reached into a small sack and pulled out a piece of meat for Krohn, who snatched it up.

Thor looked out at the vast sea before them. The distant horizon was dotted with black Empire ships, surely on their way to the

McCloud side of the Ring. Luckily, they were distracted, and could not possibly be on the lookout for a lone boat heading into their territory. The skies were clear, there was a strong wind at their backs, and they continued to gain speed.

Thor looked out and wondered what lay before them. He wondered how long it would be until they reached Empire land, what might be waiting to greet them. He wondered how they would find the sword, how all this would end. He knew the odds were against them, yet still he felt exhilarated to finally be on the journey, thrilled that they'd made it this far, and felt eager to do retrieve the Sword.

"What if it's not there?" Reece asked.

Thor turned and looked at him.

"The sword," Reece added. "What if it's not there? Or if it's lost? Or destroyed? Or if we just never find it? The Empire is vast, after all."

"Or what if the Empire's figured out how to wield it?" Elden asked in his deep voice, coming up beside them.

"What if we find it but can't bring it back?" Conven asked.

The group of them stood there, oppressed by what lay before them, by the sea of unanswered questions. This journey was madness, Thor knew.

Madness.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gareth paced the stone floors of his father's study, a small chamber on the top floor of the castle that his father had cherished, and bit by bit, he tore it apart.

Gareth went from bookcase to bookcase, yanking down precious volumes, ancient leather books that had been in the family for centuries, and tearing the bindings and shredding the pages in small bits. As he threw them in the air, they fell down over his head like snowflakes, clinging to his body and to the drool running down his cheeks. He was determined to tear apart every last thing in this place that his father loved, one book at a time.

Gareth hurried over to a corner table, grabbed what was left of his opium pipe, and with shaking hands sucked hard, needing his hit now more than ever. He was addicted, smoking it every minute he could, determined to block out the images of his father that haunted him in his dreams, and now even when he was awake.

As Gareth put down the pipe, he saw his father standing there, before him, a decaying corpse. Each time the corpse was more decayed, more skeleton than flesh; Gareth turned from the awful site.

Gareth used to try to attack the image—but he'd learned that it did no good. So now he just turned his head, constantly, always looking away. Always it was the same: his father wearing a rusted crown, his mouth open, his eyes gazing at him with contempt, reaching out a single finger, pointing accusingly at him. In that awful stare, Gareth felt his own days numbered, felt that it was only a matter of time until he joined him. He hated seeing him more than anything. If there was one saving grace in murdering his father, it was that he would not need to see his face again. But now, ironically, he saw it more than ever.

Gareth turned and hurled the opium pipe at the apparition, hoping that if he threw it quickly enough it might actually hit.

But the pipe merely flew through the air and smashed against the wall, shattering. His father still stood there, and glared down at him.

"Those drugs won't help you now," his father scolded.

Gareth could stand it no longer. He charged for the apparition, hands out, lunging to scratch his father's face; but as always, he sailed through nothing but air, and this time he went stumbling across the room and landed hard on his father's wooden desk, sending it crashing down to the floor with him.

Gareth rolled on the ground, winded, and looked up and saw that he had gashed his arm. Blood was dripping down his shirt, and he looked down and noticed he still wore the undershirt he had slept in

for days; in fact, he had not changed for weeks now. He glanced over at a reflection of himself, and saw that his hair was wild; he looked like a common ruffian. A part of him could hardly believe he had sank so low. But another part of him no longer cared. The only thing left inside of him was a burning desire to destroy—to destroy any remnant of his father that once was. He would like to have this castle razed, and King's Court with it. It would be vengeance for the treatment he bore as a child. The memories were stuck inside him, like a thorn he could not pull out.

The door to his father's study opened wide, and in rushed one of Gareth's attendants, looking down in fear.

"My liege," the attendant said. "I heard a crash. Are you okay? My liege, you are bleeding!"

Gareth looked up at the boy with hatred. Gareth tried to get to his feet, to lash out at him, but he slipped on something, and fell back down to the ground, disoriented from the last hit of opium.

"My liege, I will help you!"

The boy rushed forward and grabbed Gareth's arm, which was too thin, barely flesh and bone.

But Gareth still had a reserve of strength and as the boy touched his arm, he shoved him off, sending him across the room.

"Touch me again and I will cut off your hands," Gareth seethed.

The boy backed up in fear, and as he did, another attendant entered the room, accompanied by an older man whom Gareth vaguely recognized. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew him —but he could not place him.

"My liege," came an old, gravelly voice, "we have been waiting for you in the council chamber for half the day. The council members cannot wait much longer. They have urgent news, and must share it with you before the day is up. Will you come?"

Gareth narrowed his eyes at the man, trying to make him out. He dimly remembered that he had served his father. The council chamber… The meeting… It all swirled in his mind.

"Who are you?" Gareth asked.

"My liege, I am Aberthol. Your father's trusted advisor," he said, stepping closer.

It was slowly coming back. Aberthol. The council. The meeting. Gareth's mind spun, his head crushing him. He just wanted to be left alone.

"Leave me," he snapped. "I will come."

Aberthol nodded and hurried from the room with the attendant, closing the door behind them.

Gareth knelt there, head in his hands, trying to think, to remember. It was all so much. It started to come back to him in bits.

The shield was down; the Empire was attacking; half his court had left; his sister had led them away; to Silesia…Gwendolyn…That was it. That was what he had been trying to remember.

Gwendolyn. He hated her with a passion he could not describe. Now, more than ever, he wanted to kill her. He *needed* to kill her. All of his troubles in this world—they were all a result of her. He would find a way to get back at her, even if he had to die trying. And he would kill his other siblings next.

Gareth started to feel better at the thought.

With a supreme effort, he struggled to his feet and stumbled through the room, knocking over an end table as he went. As he neared the door, he spotted an alabaster bust of his father, a sculpture his father had loved, and he reached down, grabbed it by its head and threw it at the wall.

It smashed into a thousand pieces, and for the first time that day, Gareth smiled. Maybe this day would not be so bad after all.

* * *

Gareth strutted into the council room flanked by several attendants, slamming open the huge oak doors with his palm, making everyone in the crowded room jump at his presence. They all quickly stood at attention.

While normally this would give Gareth some satisfaction, on this day, he was beyond caring. He was plagued by the ghost of his father, and infused with rage that his sister had left. His emotions swirled within him, and he had to take it out on the world.

Gareth stumbled through the vast chamber in his opium-infused haze, walking down the center of the aisle towards his throne, dozens of councilmen standing aside as he went. His court had grown, and today the energy was frantic, as more and more people seemed to filter in with the news of the departure of half of King's Court, and of the shield's being down. It was as if whomever remained of King's Court was pouring into Gareth's court for answers.

And of course, Gareth had none.

As Gareth strutted up the ivory steps to his father's throne, he saw, standing patiently behind it, Lord Kultin, the mercenary leader of his private fighting force, the one man left in the court who he could trust. Alongside him stood dozens of his fighters, standing there silently, hands on their swords, ready to fight to the death for Gareth. It was the one thing left that gave Gareth comfort.

Gareth sat in his throne, and surveyed the room. There were so many faces, a few he recognized and many he didn't. He trusted none

of them. Every day he purged more from his court; he had already sent so many to the dungeons, and even more to the executioner. Not a day passed when he didn't kill at least a handful of men. He thought it good policy: it kept the men on their toes, and prevented a coup from forming.

The room sat silent, staring at him in a daze. They all looked terrified to speak. Which was exactly what he wanted. Nothing thrilled him more than infusing fear in his subjects.

Finally, Aberthol stepped forward, his cane echoing off the stone, and cleared his throat.

"My liege," he began, his voice ancient, "we stand at a moment of great disarray in King's Court. I do not know what news has yet reached you: the Shield is down; Gwendolyn has left King's Court and has taken Kolk, Brom, Kendrick, Atme, the Silver, the Legion, and half of your army—along with half of King's Court. Those that remain here look to you for guidance, and to know what our next move will be. The people want answers, my liege."

"What's more," said another Council member whom Gareth dimly recognized, "word has spread that the Canyon has already been breached. Rumor has it that Andronicus has invaded the McCloud side of the Ring with his million man army."

An outraged gasp spread throughout the room; dozens of brave warriors whispered to each other, flooded with fear, and a state of panic spread like wildfire.

"It can't be true!" exclaimed one of the soldiers.

"It is!" insisted the councilmember.

"Then all hope is lost!" yelled out another soldier. "If the McClouds are overrun, the Empire will come for King's Court next. There's no way we can keep them back."

"We must discuss terms of surrender, my liege," Aberthol said to Gareth.

"Surrender!?" another man yelled. "We shall never surrender!"

"If we don't," yelled another soldier, "we will be crushed. How can we stand up to one million men?"

The room broke out into an outraged murmur, the soldiers and counselors arguing with each other, all in complete disarray.

The Council leader slammed his iron rod into the stone floor and screamed:

"ORDER!"

Gradually, the room quieted, all the men turned and looked at him.

"These are all decisions for a king, not for us," one of the council men said. "Gareth is lawful King, and it is not for us to discuss terms of surrender—or whether to surrender at all."

They all turned to Gareth.

“My liege,” Aberthol said, exhaustion in his voice, “how do you propose we deal with the Empire’s army?”

The room grew deathly silent.

Gareth sat there, staring down at the men, and he wanted to respond. But it was getting harder and harder for him to keep his thoughts clear. He kept hearing his father’s voice in his head, yelling at him, as when he was a child. It was driving him crazy, and the voice would not go away.

Gareth reached out and scratched the wooden arm of the throne, again and again, and the sound of his fingernails clawing were the only sound in the room.

The council members exchanged a worried glance.

“My liege,” another councilman prompted, “if you choose not to surrender, then we must fortify King’s Court at once. We must secure all the entrances, all the roads, all the gates. We must call up all the soldiers, prepare defenses. We must prepare for a siege, ration food, protect our citizens. There is much to be done. Please, my Liege. Give us a command. Tell us what to do.”

Once again the room fell silent, as all eyes fixed on Gareth.

Finally, Gareth lifted his chin and stared out.

“We will not fight the Empire,” he declared. “Nor will we surrender.”

Everyone in the room looked at each other, confused.

“Then what shall we do, my liege?” Aberthol asked.

Gareth cleared his throat.

“We shall kill Gwendolyn!” he declared. “That is all that matters now.”

There followed a shocked silence.

“Gwendolyn?” a councilman called out in surprise, as the room broke out into another surprised murmur.

“We will send all of our forces after her, to slaughter her and those with her before they reach Silesia,” Gareth announced.

“But, my Liege, how shall this help us?” a councilman called out. “If we venture out to attack her, that will only leave our forces exposed. They would all be surrounded and slaughtered by the Empire.”

“It would also leave King’s Court open for attack!” called out another. “If we are not going to surrender, we must fortify King’s Court at once!”

A group of men shouted in agreement.

Gareth turned and looked at the councilman, his eyes cold.

“We will use every man we have to kill my sister!” he said darkly. “We will not spare even one!”

The room fell silent as a councilman pushed back his chair, scraping against the stone, and stood.

"I will not see King's Court ruined for your personal obsession. I, for one, am not with you!"

"Nor I!" echoed half the men in the room.

Gareth felt himself fuming with rage, and was about to stand when suddenly the doors to the chamber burst open and in rushed the commander of what remained of the army. All eyes were on him. He dragged a man in his arms, a ruffian with greasy hair, unshaven, bound by his wrists. He dragged the man all the way to the center of the room, and stopped before the king.

"My liege," the commander said coldly. "Of the six thieves executed for the theft of the Destiny Sword, this man was the seventh, the one who escaped. He tells the most fantastical tale of what happened.

"Speak!" the commander prodded, shaking the ruffian.

The ruffian looked nervously in every direction, his greasy hair clinging to his cheeks, looking unsure. Finally, he yelled out:

"We were ordered to steal the sword!"

The room broke out into an outraged murmur.

"There were nineteen of us!" the ruffian continued. "A dozen were to take it away, in the cover of darkness, across the Canyon bridge, and into the wilds. They hid it in a wagon and escorted it across the bridge, so the soldiers standing guard would have no idea what was inside. The others, the seven of us, were ordered to stay behind after the theft. We were told we would be imprisoned, as a show, and then let free. But instead, my friends were all executed. I would have been to, had I not escaped."

The room broke out into a long, agitated murmur.

"And where were they taking the sword?" the commander pressed.

"I do not know. Somewhere deep inside the Empire."

"And who ordered such a thing?"

"He!" the ruffian said, suddenly turning and pointing a bony finger up at Gareth. "Our King! He commanded us to do it!"

The room broke out into a horrified murmur, shouts arising, until finally a councilman slammed his iron staff several times and screamed for silence.

The room quieted, but barely.

Gareth, already shaking with fear and rage, stood slowly from his throne, and the room quieted, as all eyes fell on him.

One step at a time, Gareth descended the ivory steps, his footsteps echoing, the silence so thick one could cut it with a knife.

He crossed the chamber, until finally he reached the ruffian. He

stared back at him coldly, a foot away, the man squirming in the commander's arm, looking every which way but at him.

"Thieves and liars are dealt with only one way in my kingdom," Gareth said softly.

Gareth suddenly pulled a dagger from his waist and plunged it in the ruffian's heart.

The man screamed out in pain, his eyes bulging, then suddenly slumped down to the ground, dead.

The commander looked over at Gareth, scowling down at him.

"You have just murdered a witness against you," the commander said. "Don't you realize that that only serves to further insinuate your guilt?"

"What witness?" Gareth asked, smiling. "Dead men don't speak."

The commander reddened.

"Lest you forget, I am commander of the half of the King's army. I will not be played for a fool. From your actions, I can only surmise that you are guilty of the crime he accused you of. As such, I and my army shall serve you no longer. In fact, I will take you into custody, on the grounds of treason to the Ring!"

The commander nodded to his men, and as one, several dozen soldiers drew their swords and stepped forward to arrest Gareth.

Lord Kultin came forward with twice as many of his own men, all drawing their swords and walking up behind Gareth.

They stood there, facing off with the commander's soldiers, Gareth in the middle.

Gareth smiled triumphantly back at the commander. His men were outnumbered by Gareth's fighting force, and he knew it.

"I will go into no one's custody," Gareth sneered. "And certainly not by your hand. Take your men and leave my court—or meet the wrath of my personal fighting force."

After several tense seconds, the commander finally turned and gestured to his men, and as one, they all retreated, walking warily backwards, swords drawn, from the room.

"From this day forward," the commander boomed, "let it be known that we no longer serve you! You will face the Empire's army on your own. I hope they treat you well. Better than you treated your father!"

The soldiers all stormed from the room, in a great clang of armor.

The dozens of councilmen and attendants and noblemen who remained all stood in the silence, whispering.

"Leave me!" Gareth screamed. "ALL OF YOU!"

All the people left in the chamber quickly filed out, including Gareth's own fighting force left.

Only one person remained, lingering behind the others.

Lord Kultin.

Just he and Gareth were alone in the room, and he walked up to Gareth, stopping a few feet away, and examined him, as if summing him up. As usual, his face was expressionless. It was the true face of a mercenary.

“I don’t care what you did or why,” he began, his voice gravelly and dark. “I don’t care about politics. I’m a fighter. I care only for the money you pay me, and my men.”

He paused.

“Yet I would like to know, for my own personal satisfaction: did you truly order those men to take the sword away?”

Gareth stared back at the man. There was something in his eyes that he recognized in himself: they were cold, remorseless, opportunistic.

“And if I did?” Gareth asked back.

Lord Kultin stared back for a long time.

“But why?” he asked.

Gareth stared back, silent.

Kultin’s eyes widened in recognition.

“You couldn’t wield it, so no one could?” asked Kultin. “Is that it?”

“Yet even so,” Kultin added, “surely you knew that sending it away would lower the shield, make us vulnerable to attack.”

Kultin’s eyes opened wider.

“You *wanted* us to be attacked, didn’t you? Something in you wanted King’s Court destroyed,” he said, suddenly realizing.

Gareth smiled back.

“Not all places,” Gareth said slowly, “are meant to last forever.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Gwendolyn marched with the huge entourage of soldiers, advisors, attendants, councilors, Silver, Legion, and half of King's Court, as they all made their way—one huge, walking city—away from King's Court. Gwen was overwhelmed with emotion. On the one hand, she was thrilled to finally be free from her brother Gareth, to be far from his reach, surrounded by trusted warriors who could protect her, with no fear of his treachery, of being married off to anyone. Finally, she would not have to watch her back every waking moment from fear of one of his assassins.

Gwen also felt inspired and humbled to be chosen to rule, to lead this huge contingent of people. The huge entourage followed her as if she were some sort of prophet, all marching on the endless road to Silesia. They saw her as their ruler—she could see it in their every glance—looked to her with expectation. She felt guilty, wanting one of her brothers to have the honor—anyone but her. Yet she saw how much hope it gave the people to have a fair and just leader, and that made her happy. If she could fulfill that role for them, especially in these dark times, she would.

Gwen thought of Thor, of their teary goodbye at the Canyon, and it broke her heart; she saw him disappearing, walking across the Canyon bridge, into the mist, on his way for a journey that would almost surely lead to his death. It was a valiant and noble quest—one she could not deny him—one she knew that had to be taken, for the sake of the kingdom, for the sake of the Ring. Yet she also kept asking herself why it had to be *him*. She wished it could be anyone else. Now, more than ever, she wanted him by her side. In this time of turmoil, of huge transition, as she was left all alone to rule, to carry his child, she wanted him here. More than anything, she worried for him. She could not imagine life without him; the thought of it made her want to cry.

But Gwen breathed deep and stayed strong, knowing that all eyes were on her as they marched, an endless caravan on this dusty road, heading ever farther North, towards the distant Silesia.

Gwen was also still in shock, torn apart for her homeland. She could hardly fathom that the ancient Shield was down, that the Canyon had been breached. Rumors had been circulating from distant spies that Andronicus had already landed on McCloud's shores. She could not be certain what to believe. She had a hard time fathoming that it could have happened so quickly—after all, Andronicus would still have to send his entire fleet across the ocean. Unless somehow McCloud had been behind the theft of the sword, and had orchestrated the downing of the Shield. But how? How had he

managed to steal it? Where was he taking it?

Gwen could feel how dejected everyone was around her, and she could hardly blame them. There was an air of despondency among this crowd, and for good reason; without the shield, they were all defenseless. It was only a matter of time—if not today, then tomorrow or the day after—that Andronicus would invade. And when he did, there was no way they could hold back his men. Soon this place, everything she had grown to love and cherish, would be conquered and everyone she loved would be killed.

As they marched, it was as if they were marching to their deaths. Andronicus was not here yet, but it was as if they had all already been captured in their hearts. She recalled something her father once said: conquer an army's heart, and the battle is already won.

Gwen knew it was up to her to inspire them all, to make them feel a sense of safety, of security—somehow, even, of optimism. She was determined to do so. She could not let her personal fears or a sense of pessimism overcome her at a time like this. And she refused to allow herself to wallow in self-pity. This was no longer just about her. It was about these people, their lives, their families. They needed her. They were all looking to her for help.

Gwen thought of her father, and wondered what he would do. It made her smile to think of him. He would have put on a brave face, no matter what. He had always told her to hide fear with bluster, and as she thought back on it he had never seemed afraid. Not once. Perhaps it was just show; but it was a *good* show. As leader, he had known he was on display at all times, had known that it was the *show* that people needed, perhaps even more than the leadership. He was too selfless to indulge in his fears. She would learn from his example. She would not either.

Gwen looked around and saw Godfrey marching beside her, and beside him Illepra, the healer; these two were engaged in conversation, and the two of them, she had noticed, seemed to take an ever-increasing liking to each other, ever since Illepra had saved his life. Gwen longed for her other siblings to be here, too. But Reece was gone with Thor, Gareth of course was gone from her forever, and Kendrick was still in his outpost, somewhere in the east, still helping to rebuild that remote town. She had sent a messenger for him—it had been the first thing she had done—and she prayed he would reach him in time to retrieve him, bring him to Silesia to be with her and help defend it. At least, then, two of her siblings—Kendrick and Godfrey—would take refuge in Silesia with her; that accounted for all of them. Except, of course, for her oldest sister, Luanda.

For the first time in a long time, Gwen's thoughts turned to Luanda. She had always had a bitter rivalry with her older sister; it

had not surprised Gwen in the least that Luanda had taken the first chance she could to flee King's Court and marry that McCloud. Luanda had always been ambitious and had always wanted to be first. Gwendolyn had loved her, and had looked up to her when she was younger; but Luanda, ever competitive, had not returned the love. And after a while, Gwen had stopped trying.

Yet now Gwen felt bad for her; she wondered what had become of her, with the McClouds invaded by Andronicus. Would she be killed? Gwen shuddered at the thought. They were rivals, but at the end of the day, they were still sisters, and she did not want to see her dead before her time.

Gwen thought of her mother, the only other one left in her family out there, stranded at King's Court, with Gareth, still in her state. The thought made her cold. Despite all the anger she still had for her mother, Gwen did not want her to end up like she did. What would happen if King's Court were overrun? Would her mother be slaughtered?

Gwen could not help but feel as if her carefully built-up life was collapsing around her. It seemed like only yesterday that it was the height of summer, Luanda's wedding, a glorious feast, King's Court overflowing with abundance, she and her family all together, celebrating—and the Ring impregnable. It had seemed as if it would last forever.

Now everything had splintered apart. Nothing was as it once had been.

A cold autumn breeze picked up, and Gwen pulled her blue wool sweater tight over her shoulders. Fall had been too short this year, and winter was already coming. She could feel the icy breezes, getting heavier with moisture as they header farther North along the Canyon. The sky was growing darker sooner, and the air was filled with a new sound—the cry of the Winter Birds, the red and black vultures that circled low when the temperature dropped. They cawed incessantly, and the sound sometimes grated on Gwen. It was like the sound of death coming.

Since saying goodbye to Thor they had all headed alongside the Canyon, following it North, knowing it would take them to western-most city in the western part of the Ring—Silesia. As they went, the Canyon's eerie mist rolled off it in waves, clinging to Gwen's ankles.

"We are not far now, my lady," came the voice.

Gwen looked over to see Srog standing on her other side, dressed in the distinctive red armor of Silesia and flanked by several of his warriors, all dressed in their red chain mail and boots. Gwen had been touched by Srog's kindness to her, by his loyalty to the memory of her father, by his offering Silesia as a refuge. She did not know what she,

and all of these people, would have done otherwise. They would still, even now, be stuck in King's Court, at the mercy of Gareth's treachery.

Srog was one of the most honorable lords she had ever met. With thousands of soldiers at his disposal, with his control of the famed stronghold of the West, Silesia, Srog had not needed to pay homage to anyone. But he paid homage to her father. It had always been a delicate power balance. In the times of her father's father, Silesia had needed King's Court; in her father's times, less so; and in her time, not at all. In fact, with the lowering of the Shield and the chaos at King's Court, they were the ones who needed Silesia. Of course, the Silver and Legion were the finest warriors there were—as were the thousands of troops accompanying Gwen, that comprised half of the King's army. Yet Srog, like most other lords, could have simply lowered his gates and looked after his own.

Instead, he had sought Gwen out, had paid allegiance to her, and had insisted on hosting all of them. It had been a kindness which Gwen was determined to somehow, one day, repay. That is, if they all survived.

"You need not worry," she replied softly, laying a gentle hand on his wrist. "We would march to the ends of the earth to enter your city. We are most fortunate for your kindness in this difficult time."

Srog smiled. A middle-aged warrior with too many lines etched into his face from battle, red-brownish hair, a strong jaw line and no beard, Srog was a man's man, not only a Lord, but a true warrior.

"For your father, I would walk through fire," he responded. "Thanks are not in order. It is a great honor to be able to repay my debt to him in service of his daughter. After all, it was his wish that you should rule. So when I answer to you, I answer to him."

Near Gwen also marched Kolk and Brom, and behind them all was the ever-present clatter of thousands of spurs, of swords jingling in their scabbards, of shields brushing up against armor. It was a huge cacophony of noise, heading farther and farther north along the Canyon's edge.

"My lady," Kolk said, "I am burdened by guilt. We shouldn't have let Thor, Reece and the others head out alone into the Empire. More of us should have volunteered to go with them. It will be on my head if anything should happen to them."

"It was the quest they chose," Gwen responded. "It was a quest of honor. Whoever was meant to go, has gone. Guilt does no one any good."

"And what should happen if they don't return in time with the Sword?" Srog asked. "It won't be long until Andronicus' army appears at our gates."

"Then we shall make a stand," Gwen said confidently, raising as

much courage in her voice as she could, hoping to put others at ease. She noticed the other generals turn and look at her.

"We will defend until the last blow," she added. "There will be no retreat, no surrender."

She sensed the generals were impressed. She was impressed by her own voice, the strength rising up within her, surprising even her. It was the strength of her father, of seven generations of MacGil kings.

As they continued to march, the road curved sharply to the left, and as Gwen turned the corner she stopped in her tracks, breathless at the site.

Silesia.

Gwen remembered her father taking her on trips here, when she was a young girl. It was a place that lingred in her dreams ever since, a place that had felt magic magical to her then. Now, laying her eyes on it as a grown woman, it still felt magical. It took her breath away.

Silesia was the most unusual city Gwen had ever seen. All of the buildings, all of the fortifications, all of the stone—everything was built of an ancient, shining red. The upper half Silesia, tall, vertical, replete with parapets and spires, was built on the mainland, while the lower half was built down below, into the side of the Canyon. The swirling mists of the Canyon blew in and out, enveloping it, making the red shine and sparkle in the light—and making it seem as if it were built in the clouds.

Its fortifications rose a hundred feet, crowned in parapets and backed by an endless row of walls. The place was a fortress. Even if an army somehow breached its walls, it still would have to descend to the lower half of the city, straight down the cliffs, and fight on the edge of the Canyon. It was clearly a war that no invading army would want to wage. Which was why this city had stood for a thousand years.

Her men stopped and gaped, and Gwen could feel that they were all in awe, too.

For the first time in a while, Gwen felt a sense of optimism. This was a place they could stay, away from Gareth's reach, a place they could defend. A place where she could rule. And maybe—just maybe—the MacGil kingdom could rise again.

Srog stood there, hands on his hips, taking it all in as if seeing his own city for the first time, his eyes shining with pride.

"Welcome to Silesia."

CHAPTER SIX

Thor opened his eyes at the crack of dawn to see the gently rolling waves of the ocean, rising and falling in huge crests, blanketed by the soft light of the first sun. The light yellow water of the Tartuvian sparkled in the morning mist. The shipped bobbed silently in the water, the only sound that of the lapping of the waves against its hull.

Thor sat up and looked around. His eyes were heavy with exhaustion—in fact, he had never felt this tired in his life. They had been sailing for days, and everything here, on this side of the world, felt different. The air was so thick with humidity, the temperature so much warmer, it was like breathing in a constant stream of water. It made him feel sluggish, made his limbs feel heavy. He felt as if he had arrived at Summer.

Thor looked around and saw that all of his friends, normally up before dawn, were all slumped on the deck, sleeping. Even Krohn, always awake, was asleep beside him. The thick tropical weather had affected them all. None of them even bothered to man the wheel anymore—they had given that up days ago. There was no point: their sails were always at full mast with a driving westerly wind, and the magical tides of this ocean constantly pulled their ship in one direction. It was as if they were being pulled to one location, and they had tried several times to steer or change course—but it was useless. They had all become resigned to let the Tartuvian take them where it would.

It's not like they knew where in the Empire to go anyway, Thor mused. As long as the tides took them to dry land, he figured, that would be good enough.

Krohn roused, whining, and leaned up and licked Thor's face. Thor reached into his sack, nearly empty, and gave Thor the last of his dried meat sticks. To Thor's surprise, Krohn did not snatch it from his hand, as he usually did; instead, Krohn looked at it, looked at the empty sack, then looked back at Thor meaningfully. He hesitated to take the food, and Thor realized that Krohn didn't want to take the last piece from him.

Thor was touched by the gesture, but he insisted, pushing the meat into his friend's mouth. Thor knew they would be out of food soon, and prayed that they reached land. He had no idea how much longer the journey could take; what if it took months? How would they eat?

The sun rose quickly here, growing bright and strong too quickly, and Thor stood as the mist began to burn off of the water and he went

to the bow.

Thor stood there and looked out, the deck rocking gently beneath him, and watched as the mist rose. He blinked, wondering if he were seeing things, as the outline of a distant land appeared on the horizon. His pulse quickened. It was land. Real land!

The land appeared in a most unusual shape: two long, narrow peninsulas stuck out into the sea, like two ends of a pitchfork, and as the mist lifted, Thor looked to his left and right and was amazed to see two strips of land on either side of them, each about fifty yards off. They were being sucked right down the middle of a long inlet.

Thor whistled, and his Legion brothers arose. They scrambled to their feet and hurried over beside him, standing at the bow, looking out.

They all stood there, breathless at the site: the shores were the most exotic he had ever seen, densely packed with jungle, soaring trees clinging to the shoreline, so thick that it was impossible to see beyond them. Thor spotted huge ferns, thirty feet tall, leaning over the water; he looked up and saw yellow and purple trees that seemed to reach into the sky; and everywhere, there were the foreign and persistent noises of beasts, birds, insects and he did not know what else, snarling and crying and singing.

Thor swallowed hard. He felt as if they were entering an impenetrable animal kingdom. Everything felt different here; the air smelled different, foreign. Nothing here remotely reminded him of the Ring. The other Legion members all turned and looked at each other, and Thor could see the hesitation in their eyes. They all wondered what creatures lay in wait for them inside that jungle.

It was not as if they had a choice. The current brought them one way, and clearly this was where they needed to disembark to enter the Empire's lands.

"Over here!" O'Connor yelled.

They rushed to O'Connor's side of the railing, as he leaned over and pointed down at the water. There, swimming alongside the ship, was a huge insect, a luminescent purple, ten feet long, with hundreds of legs. It glowed beneath the waves, then scurried along the water's surface; as it did, its thousands of small wings started buzzing, and it lifted just above the water. Then it went back to gliding along the surface, then it plunged below. Then it repeated the process all over again.

As they watched, it suddenly rose up, higher in the air, to eye level with the boys, hovering, staring at them with its four large green eyes. It hissed, and they all jumped back involuntarily, reaching for their swords.

Elden stepped forward and swung at it. But by the time his sword

reached the air, it was already back in the water.

Thor and the others went flying, crashing on the deck, as their boat came to a sudden stop, lodging itself on shore with a jolt.

Thor's heart beat faster as he looked over the edge: beneath them was a narrow beach made up of thousands of small jagged rocks, bright purple in color.

Land. They had made it.

Elden lead the way to the anchor, and they all hoisted it and dropped it over the edge. They each climbed down the chain, jumping off it and landing on shore, Thor handing Krohn to Elden as he went.

Thor sighed as his feet touched the ground. It felt so good to have land—dry, steady land—beneath his feet. He would be fine if he never set sail on a ship again.

They all grabbed the ropes and dragged the boat as far onto shore as they could.

"Do you think the tides will take it away?" Reece asked, looking up at the boat.

Thor looked at it; it seemed secure in the sand.

"Not with that anchor," Elden said.

"The tide won't take it," O'Connor said. "The question is whether someone else will."

Thor took one long last look at the ship, and realized his friend was right. Even if they found the sword, they might very well return to an empty shore.

"And then how will we get back?" Conval asked.

Thor could not help but feel as if, every step of the way, they were burning their bridges.

"We shall find a way," Thor said. "After all, there must be other ships in the Empire, right?"

Thor tried to sound authoritative, to reassure his friends. But deep down, he was not so sure himself. This entire journey was feeling increasingly ominous to him.

As one, they turned and faced the jungle, staring at it. It was a wall of foliage, blackness behind it. The animal noises rose up in a cacophony all around them, so loud that Thor could hardly hear himself think. It felt as if every beast of the Empire was screaming out to greet them.

Or to warn them.

* * *

Thor and the others hiked side-by-side, warily, each of them on guard, through the thick, tropical jungle. It was hard for Thor to hear

himself think, so persistent were the screams and cries of the orchestra of insects and animals around him. Yet when he looked into the blackness of the foliage, he could not spot them.

Krohn walked at his heels, snarling, the hair standing on his back. Thor had never seen him so alert. He looked over at his brothers-in-arms, and saw each, like he, with a hand resting on the hilt of his sword, all of them on-edge, too.

They had been hiking for hours now, deeper and deeper into the jungle, the air becoming hotter and thicker, more humid, heavier to breathe. They had followed the traces of what appeared to once be a trail, a few broken branches hinting at the path the group of men who had arrived here may have taken. Thor only hoped that it was the trail of the group who had stolen the sword.

Thor looked up, in awe of the nature: everything was overgrown to epic proportion, every leaf as big as Thor. He felt like an insect in a land of giants. He saw something rustling behind some of the leaves, but couldn't actually see anything. He had the ominous feeling that they were being watched.

The trail before them suddenly ended in a solid wall of foliage. They all stopped and looked at each other, puzzled.

"But the trail can't just disappear!" O'Connor said, hopeless.

"It didn't," Reece said, examining the leaves. "The jungle just grew back on itself."

"So which way now?" Conval asked.

Thor turned and looked all around, wondering the same thing. In every direction was just more of the dense foliage, and there seemed to be no way out. Thor was beginning to have a sinking feeling, and felt increasingly lost.

Then he had an idea.

"Krohn," he said, kneeling down and whispering in Krohn's ear. "Climb that tree. Look for us. Tell us which way to go."

Krohn looked up at him with his soulful eyes, and Thor felt he understood.

Krohn sprinted for an enormous tree, the trunk as wide as ten men, and without hesitating pounced on it and clawed his way up. Krohn sprinted straight up then leapt out onto one of the highest branches. He walked out to its tip and looked out, his ears standing straight. Thor had always sensed that Krohn understood him, and now he knew for certain that he did.

Krohn leaned back and made a strange purring noise in the back of his throat, then scurried back down the trunk and took off in one direction. The boys exchanged a curious look, then all turned and followed Krohn, heading off into that part of the jungle, pushing back the thick leaves so they could walk.

After a few minutes of following him, Thor was relieved to see the trail pick up again, the telltale signs of broken branches and foliage showing which way the group had went. Thor leaned down and patted Krohn, kissing him on the head.

"I don't know what we would have done without him," Reece said.

"Nor do I," Thor responded.

Krohn purred, satisfied, proud.

As they continued deeper into the jungle, twisting and turning, they came to a stretch of new foliage, with flowers all around them, enormous, the size of Thor, bursting with every color. Other trees had fruits the size of boulders hanging from the branches.

They all stopped in wonder as Conval walked over to one of the fruits, glowing red, and reached up to touch it.

Suddenly, there came a deep, growling noise.

Conval backed away and grabbed his sword, and the others all looked at each other anxiously.

"What was that?" Conval asked.

"It came from over there," Reece said, gesturing to another part of the jungle.

They all turned and looked. But Thor could see nothing but leaves. Krohn snarled back at it.

The noise grew louder, more persistent, and finally, the branches began to rustle. Thor and the others took a step back, drawing their swords, and they waited, expecting the worst.

What stepped forward from the jungle exceeded even Thor's worst expectations. Standing there before them was an enormous insect, five times Thor's size, resembling a praying mantis, with two rear legs, two smaller front legs that dangled in the air, and long claws at the end of them. Its body was a fluorescent green, covered in scales, and it had small wings which buzzed and vibrated. It had two eyes at the top of its head, and a third eye on the tip of its nose. It reached around and revealed more claws which Thor hadn't seen, hidden under its throat, which vibrated and snapped.

It stood there, towering over them, and another claw came out from its stomach, a long skinny arm, protruding; suddenly, faster than any of them could react, it reached out and snatched O'Connor, its three claws expanding and wrapping around his waist. It lifted him high in the air, as if he were a leaf.

O'Connor swung his sword, but he was nowhere near quick enough. The beast shook him several times, then suddenly opened its mouth, revealing row after row of sharp teeth, turned O'Connor sideways, and began to lower him towards it.

O'Connor shrieked, as an instant and painful death loomed.

Thor reacted. Without thinking, he placed a stone in his sling, took aim and hurled it at the beast's third eye, at the tip of its nose.

It was a direct strike. The beast shrieked, an awful noise, loud enough to split a tree, then dropped O'Connor, who fell end over end and landed on the soft jungle floor with a thump.

The beast, enraged, then turned its sights on Thor.

Thor knew that making a stand and fighting this creature would be futile. At least one of his brothers would get killed, and likely Krohn, too, and it would drain whatever precious energy they had. He felt that maybe they had intruded on its territory, and that if they could get out of there quick enough, it might just leave them be.

"RUN!" Thor screamed.

They turned and ran—and the beast began to chase after them.

Thor could hear the sound of the beast's nails cutting through the dense foliage right behind them, slicing through the air and missing his head by a few feet. Shredded leaves flew up into the air and rained down around him. They all ran as one, and Thor felt that if they could just gain enough distance, they could find a way to take shelter. If not, then they would have to make a stand.

But Reece suddenly slipped beside him, falling over a branch, face-first into the foliage, and Thor knew he wouldn't get up in time. Thor stopped beside them, drew his sword, and stood between him and the beast.

"KEEP RUNNING!" Thor yelled over his shoulder to the others, as he stood there, ready to defend Reece.

The beast lunged for him, shrieking, and swung its claw for Thor's face. Thor ducked and swung his sword at the same time, and the beast let out a horrific shriek as Thor chopped off one of its claws. A green fluid sprayed all over Thor, and he looked up and watched in horror as the beast re-grew its claw just as quickly as it had lost it. It was as if Thor had never injured it.

Thor swallowed. This would be an impossible beast to kill. And now he had angered it.

The beast swiped down with yet another arm, coming out from somewhere else on its body, and swiped Thor hard in the ribs, sending him flying and landing in a clump of trees. The beast then lowered another claw for Thor, and Thor knew he was in trouble.

Elden, O'Connor and the twins rushed forward, and as the beast came down with another claw for Thor, O'Connor fired an arrow into its mouth, lodging in the back of its throat, making it shriek. Elden took his two-handed ax and brought it down on the beast's back, while Conven and Conval each threw a spear, lodging on each side of its throat. Reece regained his feet and plunged his sword into the beast's belly. Thor regained his feet and swung his sword at another of

the beast's arms, chopping it off. And Krohn joined them, leaping into the air and sinking his fangs into its throat.

The beast let out shriek after shriek, as they all did more damage than Thor thought possible. It was incredible to Thor that it was still standing, its wings still vibrating. This beast just would not die.

They all watched in horror as, one at a time, the beast reached over and pulled out the spears and swords and the axe lodged in it—and as it did, its injuries all healed before their eyes.

This beast was undefeatable.

The beast leaned back and roared, and all of Thor's Legion brothers looked up in shock. They had all given it everything they had, and it wouldn't even dent it.

The beast prepared to lunge at them again, with its razor sharp jaws and claws, and Thor realized there was nothing else they could do. They were all going to die.

"OUT OF THE WAY!" came a sudden scream.

The voice came from behind Thor, and it sounded like the voice of a boy. Thor turned to see a small boy, perhaps eleven, run up behind them, carrying what appeared to be a jug of water. Thor ducked and the boy threw up the water, splashing it all over the beast's face.

The beast leaned back and screeched, steam rising from its face, reaching up with its claws and tearing at its cheek, its eyes, its head. It shrieked again and again, the noise so loud that Thor had to hold his hands over his ears.

Finally, the beast turned and darted away, back into the jungle, getting lost in the foliage.

They all turned and looked at the boy with a new sense of wonder and appreciation. Dressed in rags, with longish brown hair and bright-green, intelligent eyes, the boy was covered in dirt, and he looked, from his bare feet and dirty hands, as if he lived out here.

Thor had never been more grateful to anyone.

"Weapons won't hurt a Gathorbeast," the boy said, rolling his eyes. "Lucky for you I heard the shrieks and was close. If not, you'd be dead by now. Don't you know that you never confront a Gathorbeast?"

Thor looked at his friends, all at a loss for words.

"We didn't confront it," Elden said. "It confronted us."

"They don't confront you," the boy said, "unless you intrude on its territory."

"What were we supposed to do?" Reece asked.

"Well, never look it in the eye for one," the boy said. "And if it attacks, lie face down until it leaves you be. And most of all, don't ever try to run."

Thor stepped forward and laid a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"You saved our lives," he said. "We owe you a great debt."

The boy shrugged.

"You don't look like Empire troops," he said. "You look like you came from somewhere else in the world. So why wouldn't I help you? You seem to have the markings of that group that came from the ship some days ago."

Thor and the others exchanged a knowing glance, and turned to the boy.

"Do you know where this group went?" Thor asked.

The boy shrugged.

"It was a large group, and they were carrying a weapon. It seemed heavy: it took all of them to carry it. I tracked them for days. They were easy to track. They were slow-moving. They were also sloppy, and careless. I know where they went, though I didn't track them much beyond the village. I can bring you there and point you in the right direction, if you like. But not today."

The others exchanged a puzzled look.

"Why not?" Thor asked.

"Night falls in but a few hours. You can't be outside after dark."

"But why?" Reece asked.

The boy looked at him as if he were crazy.

"The Ethabugs," he said.

Thor stepped forward and looked at the boy. He liked this boy immediately. He was intelligent, earnest, fearless, and had a lot of heart.

"Do you know a place where we can take shelter for the night?"

The boy looked back at Thor, then shrugged, looking uncertain. He stood there, wavering.

"I don't think I should," he said. "Grandpa will get mad."

Krohn suddenly emerged from behind Thor, and walked towards the boy—and the boy's eyes lit up in delight.

"Wow!" the boy exclaimed.

Krohn licked the boy's face, again and again, and the boy giggled in delight and reached up and stroked Krohn's head. Then the boy knelt down, lowered his spear, and hugged Krohn. Krohn seemed to hugged him back, and the boy laughed hysterically.

"What's his name?" the boy asked. "What is he?"

"His name is Krohn," Thor said, smiling. "He is a rare white leopard. He comes from the other side of the ocean. From the Ring. Where we are from. He likes you."

The boy kissed Krohn several times, and finally stood and looked back at Thor.

"Well," the boy said, wavering, "I guess I can bring you to our

village. Hopefully grandpa won't get too mad. If he does, you're out of luck. Follow me. We have to hurry. It will be night soon."

The boy turned and quickly weaved his way through the jungle, and Thor and the others followed. Thor was amazed at the boy's dexterity, at how well he knew the jungle. It was hard to keep up.

"People come through here from time to time," the boy said. "The ocean, the tides, it leads them right into the harbor. Some people come from the sea and cut through here, on their way somewhere else. Most of them don't make it. They get eaten by something or other in the jungle. You guys were lucky. There a lot worse things here than that Gatherbeast."

Thor swallowed.

"Worse than that? Like what?"

The boy shook his head, continuing to hike.

"You don't want to know. I've seen some pretty awful things here."

"How long have you been here?" Thor asked, curious.

"My whole life," the boy said. "My grandpa moved us when I was little."

"But why here, in this place? Surely there must be more hospitable places."

"You don't know the Empire, do you?" the boy asked. "The troops are everywhere. It's not so easy to stay out of their site. If they ever catch us, they capture us as slaves. They rarely come out here—not this deep in the jungle."

As they cut through a thick patch of foliage, Thor reached up to brush a leaf out of his way, but the boy turned and shoved Thor's hand, screaming:

"DON'T TOUCH THAT!"

They all stopped, and Thor looked over at the leaf he'd almost touched. It was large and yellow, and seemed innocent enough.

The boy reached out with his stick and gently touched the tip of it; as he did, the leaf suddenly wrapped itself around the stick, incredibly fast, and a hissing noise followed, as the tip of the stick evaporated.

Thor was shocked.

"A Rankle leaf," the boy said. "Poison. If you touched it, you'd be missing a hand right now."

Thor looked around at all the foliage with a new respect. He marveled at how lucky they had been to encounter this boy.

They continued on their hike, Thor keeping his hands close to his body, as did the others, and trying to be more careful about everywhere they stepped.

"Stay close to each other and follow my footsteps exactly," the

boy said. “Don’t touch anything. Don’t try to eat those fruits. And don’t smell those flowers either—unless you want to pass out.”

“Hey, what’s that?” O’Connor asked, turning and looking at a huge fruit dangling from a branch, long and narrow, a glistening yellow. O’Connor took a step towards it, reaching out.

“NO!” the boy screamed.

But it was too late. As he touched it, the ground give way beneath all of them, and Thor felt himself sliding, racing down a hill running with mud and water. They were stuck on a mudslide and they could not stop.

They all screamed as they slid in the mud, hundreds of feet, straight down to the black depths of the jungle.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Erec sat on his horse, breathing hard, preparing himself to attack the two hundred soldiers facing him. He had fought valiantly and had managed to take down the first hundred—but now his shoulders were weak, his hands trembling. His mind was ready to fight forever—yet he did not know how long his body would follow. Still, he would fight with all he had, as he had done his whole life, and let the fates make the decision for him.

Erec screamed and kicked the unfamiliar horse which he had stolen from one of his opponents, and charged for the soldiers.

They charged back, matching his lone battle cry with theirs, fierce. Much blood had already been spilled on this field, and clearly no one was leaving without the other side dead.

As he charged, Erec removed a throwing knife from his belt, took aim, and threw it at the lead soldier before him. It was a perfect throw, lodging in his throat, and the soldier clutched his throat, dropping the reins, and fell from his horse. As Erec had hoped, he fell before the feet of the other horses, causing several to trip over him and sending them crashing to the ground.

Erec raised a javelin with one hand, a shield in the other, lowered his faceplate, and charged with all he had. He would charge this army as fast and hard as he could, take whatever blows he would, and cut a line right through it.

Erec screamed as he charged into the group. All his years of jousting had served him well, and he used the long javelin expertly to take out one soldier after the next, knocking them down like a row of dominoes. He tucked himself into a ball and with his other hand covered himself with the shield; he felt a rain of blows descend on him, on his shield, on his armor, from all directions. He was slammed by swords and axes and maces, a storm of metal, and Erec only prayed that his armor would hold. He clung to his javelin, taking out as many soldiers as he could as he charged, cutting a path through the huge group.

Erec didn't slow, and after about a minute of riding, he finally broke out the other end, into the open, having cut a straight path of devastation right down the middle. He had taken out at least a dozen soldiers—but he had suffered for it. He breathed hard, his body aching, the clang of metal still ringing in his ears. He felt as if he had been put through a grinder. He looked down and saw he was covered in blood; luckily, he did not feel any major wounds. They seemed to be minor scratches and cuts.

Erec rode in a wide circle, looping back, preparing to face the

army again. They, too, had turned around, preparing to charge him once more. Erec was proud of his victories thus far, but it was getting harder for him to catch his breath, and he knew that one more pass through this group might finish him off. Nonetheless, he readied himself to charge again, never willing to back away from a fight.

An unusual cry suddenly arose from the rear of the army, and Erec was at first confused to see a contingent of soldiers attacking the rear. But then he recognized the armor, and his heart soared: it was his close friend from the Silver, Brandt, along with the Duke and dozens of his men. Among them, Erec's heart fell to see, was Alistair. He had asked her to stay in the safety of the castle, and she had not listened. For that, he loved her more than he could say.

The Duke's men attacked the army from behind with a fierce battle cry, causing chaos. Half of the army turned to face them, and they met in a great clang of metal, Brandt leading the way with his two-handed ax. He swung at the lead soldier, chopping off his head, and swung his axe around in the same motion and lodged it another man's chest.

Erec, inspired, got a second wind: he took advantage of the chaos and charged the other half of the army. As he galloped, he leaned over and snatched a spear protruding from the earth, leaned back and threw it with the force of ten men. The spear lodged through one soldier's throat and continued going, lodging in the chest of another.

Erec then raised his sword high and brought it down on the first soldier he reached, chopping the shaft of his mace in half, then swinging around and chopping off the man's head.

Erec continued fighting, throwing himself into the group of men with all of his remaining energy, thrusting, blocking, parrying, attacking all the soldiers who swarmed him from all sides. He alternately raised his shield, blocking blow after blow, and attacked; within moments, the soldiers were all converging around him, dozens of them, attacking him from every direction.

He killed more than he could count, but there were just too many of them, even with the Duke's men preoccupying the rear flank. One of them slipped a blow of his mace past Erec, into his back, between his shoulder blades; Erec cried out in pain as the spiked metal ball landed on his spine. He fell from his horse, down to the ground, the impact winding him.

But he did not give up. His instincts kicked in and he had the presence of mind to roll immediately, raise his shield and block a blow descending for his head. Then he parried with his sword, severing the man's arm.

A soldier aimed to trample Erec's head, and Erec spun out of the way, swung around and chopped off the horse's legs, sending its rider

to the ground; Erec then rolled over and stabbed the man in the chest.

More and more men converged on Erec, and he rolled to his knees and blocked blow after blow, countering when he could as he was swarmed. His shoulders were weakening. A particularly large knight with a straight, long beard stepped forward and raised an axe high. Erec raised his shield to block it, but another soldier kicked it from his hand, and before he could react, a third soldier stepped on his chest, pinning him down. There were just too many of them, and Erec was too weary. There was nothing left he could do but watch as the huge knight began to swing down his axe.

Suddenly there came a great commotion, and Erec looked up to see Brandt arrive, raising his sword high with a fierce cry, swinging with all he had, and in a single blow chopping the shaft of the axe in half, and also chopping off the huge knight's head.

There followed the Duke and several others, attacking all the soldiers around Erec, clearing a path to him. Erec spun, grabbed the soldier's leg who was stepping on his chest, and yanked him down to the ground; he then rolled over and snapped the man's neck with his bare hands.

Erec grabbed a dagger from the dead man's waist, spun around, and stabbed another attacker in the side of the throat who had been swinging for him. He then gained his feet, grabbed his sword from the bloody battlefield, and got his third wind.

Erec swung in every direction, invigorated to fight with his friend Brandt at his side again, as they were reinforced by more of the Duke's men. They soon cleared a path, together, killing the dozen men converging on them.

Erec found a horse and remounted, and was soon up there along with the others. He took stock of the situation: he had been joined by several dozen of the Duke's men, and together, they faced what remained of the lord's army, about a hundred men. He immediately searched for Alistair, and found her mounted on her Warkfin on the edge of the battlefield, watching over everything. She was safe from the battle, and Erec was relieved.

Erec breathed hard, Brandt beside him breathing just as hard, also covered in blood.

"I knew I would fight by your side again," Brandt said. "I just didn't think it would be so soon."

Erec smiled.

"It seems I owe you my life once again," he said.

"No you don't," Brandt said. "Remember Artania, ten years ago? Now we're even."

As they all prepared to charge against the hundred remaining men, suddenly, another cry arose from the rear of the group, and Erec

turned in confusion, trying to process what was happening. He narrowed his eyes and in the distance, he thought he saw a battle occurring at the rear of the lines. He could not understand what was happening. Were the lord's men fighting each other?

"More of your men?" Erec asked the Duke.

But the Duke shook his head, puzzled, too.

"My men are all with me. I do not know who attacks them."

Erec was baffled as the army facing them broke out into chaos, and as the men began to turn and flee from the battlefield.

As the turmoil neared, Erec finally saw what it was. He was breathless at the site.

The lord's army was being attacked from the rear by a huge group of creatures. They were twice as tall as any man, twice as broad, their skin a glowing yellow, each with two heads, and arms eight feet long. Erec recognized them at once. Covenies. They were fabled creatures, known to bear a superhuman strength that could tear a man in half with a single hand. They didn't carry any weapons—they didn't need to.

Despite himself, Erec's heart flooded with fear.

"It's not possible," Brandt said. "Covenies only live on the far side of the Canyon. What are they doing here?"

"The only way they could be here is if they found a breach in the Canyon," the Duke said.

"Or if the Shield is down," Erec said gravely.

As Erec uttered the words he suddenly felt them to be true, and his heart flooded with true fear. The shield down. The Ring open for attack. It was more than he could process. He did not worry for himself, but for the fate of the Ring. If the shield was down here, it could be down all over the entire Ring. They could be overrun. And worse, the Empire could invade.

The army before Erec disbanded, fleeing for their lives as more and more Covenies appeared, attacking them from behind, picking them up with a single hand and biting off their heads.

"Retreat to Silesia!" the Duke commanded. "We must seal the gates at once!"

As one they all turned and charged from the battlefield; Erec stopped only long enough to ride up beside Alistair, mount Warkfin behind her, and take off with her. He felt her soft hands clutching him tightly from behind, and feeling her hands on him, knowing that they were together, that she was safe, made everything right in the world.

"I owe you my life," Erec said to her, as they rode with the others.

"And I owe you mine," she answered.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kendrick stood before the rebuilt town wall, admiring his handiwork. He, along with a small group of Silver, had been fortifying this wall for days, camped out in this large town on the Eastern borderlands of the Ring, which had been badly damaged by the McCloud raid. As the Legion had been dispatched to repair the smaller villages to the south, Kendrick thought it fitting that the Silver fortify the bigger cities to the east, in the more dangerous territory close to the McClouds. It was the right thing to do, to lead by example.

Their rebuilding efforts had been a success and their time here was almost up. He hadn't been home in weeks, hadn't had any news from the world, and he sorely missed King's Court, missed his sister, his close friend Atme, all of his brothers in the Silver—he even missed his squire, Thor. He wanted to get back to King's Court as soon as possible, to make sure his sister was safe, and to help her oust Gareth. Having been imprisoned by him, Kendrick, more than most, had felt the touch of his wrath, and he burned to make wrongs right and to put his sister on the throne—for the sake of his dead father, for the sake of King's Court, and for the sake of the Ring.

The second sun sat long in the sky and it was nearing the end of another back-breaking day of labor, Kendrick supervising a hundred townsfolk as they carried oversized stones and plastered the ancient wall. Kendrick and his men advised them on the best place to fortify and defend, where to build parapets and how to build stone towers that served as lookout points. Before he'd arrived, the openings to this town's fortifications had all been too wide, there had been no slits in the stone for firing arrows, and the walls were merely a few inches thick. Now, the stone walls stood several feet thick, there was but one entrance in or out of the city, and it was shaped and built in such a way that it could be well-guarded from the inside, held with just a few men. New parapets had been built from which the townsfolk could defend with a few cauldrons of tar and a host of bows.

Kendrick was satisfied. In this new place, but a few hundred well-trained men could fend off a few thousand. These people had desperately needed the eye and labor of professional soldiers and it was now vastly more secure.

As Kendrick stood there, he felt satisfaction from a hard day's work, from helping his fellow citizens—yet there was something in the back of his mind which troubled him. He wasn't quite sure what it was. Earlier this morning he could have sworn he spotted Estopheles, circling up high, screeching in a way that disturbed him. It felt like a warning. Worse, the night before he had been up hours with troubled

dreams of this town burning, of all his handiwork being toppled to the ground. He had dreamt this dream not once, but three times, the third time waking him for good, too vivid to allow him to return to sleep.

He did not understand what it all meant. He hadn't had bad dreams since he was a child, since the night before his grandfather died. He hoped it was not a premonition of something evil.

"My lord!" came an urgent voice.

Kendrick turned to see a messenger come running up to him. It was the boy whom he had appointed to the new position of lookout on the newly-built watchtower.

"Come quick! I spot something on the horizon. I do not understand it."

Kendrick turned and ran off with the messenger, several of his men following. They cut through the winding streets of this town which Kendrick had come to know by heart, and he ran down the narrow path that twisted up a small elevation at the far end of the city, taking him to the top of a hill upon which they had built the new stone tower. It was the highest ground in the city, and the place at which Kendrick had instructed they should keep a twenty four hour watch. This was the first time the lookout had spotted anything, and Kendrick guessed that it was just a false warning from a skittish boy.

Kendrick reached the top and stood on the narrow, circular platform with the others, and followed the scout's finger as he pointed at the horizon. It was a clear, blue and yellow day, no clouds as far as the eye could see, with perfect visibility. Kendrick could see for miles, and he looked east, towards the Highlands, towards the McCloud border. As far away as they were, on this day, Kendrick could see the faint outline of the Highlands, the mountain ranges spotting the horizon, shrouded in mist.

As he looked closer, Kendrick, to his surprise, spotted something, too.

"There, my lord," the scout said, pointing to his right.

At first Kendrick did not see exactly what the scout was talking about. But as he scrutinized the horizon, he began to see it, too. There was a small, faint cloud, in the very distant horizon, appearing a tiny bit thicker than the others, and appearing slightly lower to the ground. As Kendrick watched, it seemed to grow ever thicker, darker.

"It looks like smoke," the scout said. "It doesn't make any sense."

Kendrick nodded. He was right: it didn't make any sense. Why would there be a fire on the McCloud side of the Ring? None of his people had launched a raid, as far as he knew.

"Perhaps it is a random fire that has broken out in one of their cities," one of Kendrick's men, beside him, volunteered.

Kendrick nodded, thinking. While that was a possibility, he felt it

was not the case. He sensed that something was wrong, that something bigger was happening. Something he did not understand.

Kendrick stood there, wondering, debating what his next move should be. He had been gearing up mentally to leave these borderlands, to return to King's Court; to lead an expedition now to go and investigate this would take he and his men nearly a full day's ride in the opposite direction, closer to the Highlands. It was not something he wanted to do unless there was good cause.

There came a sudden commotion, and Kendrick turned to see a lone rider approaching the town from the long road that led in the direction of King's Court. His heart soared as he recognized the rider immediately: his horse and armor gave him away. It was a man he had known and fought with since the time he could walk. His close friend of the Silver, Atme.

It warmed his heart to see him; but as Kendrick watched him gallop for the town gate, he could tell by his urgency, by his posture, that something was wrong. This was not a casual visit. Atme had urgent business, and Kendrick sensed it was bad news.

He braced himself as Atme charged through the town gate, spotted him, rode to him and dismounted, running up the stone steps for Kendrick three at a time.

"The last time I saw you run like that, you were running from your debts," Kendrick said with a smile as his old friend arrived, gasping for air, and they embraced. An attendant rushed over and handed Atme a bucket of water, and he took a long drink, then dumped the rest on his head.

"The Empire, the Canyon," Atme breathed, gasping. "The shield is down."

Kendrick's heart stopped at his words. Coming from anyone else, at any other time, he would have assumed it was a joke. But not coming from Atme, and not at this time.

Kendrick could hardly process the implications. The Shield was down. It was not possible. Not with the Destiny Sword in King's Court.

"What of the Destiny Sword?" Kendrick asked.

Atme shook his head gravely.

"It is no more," he said. "It's gone. Stolen."

Kendrick's breath froze.

"Stolen," he gasped. "How could that be?"

"A large group of men stole it in the night. They crossed the Canyon with it, boarded a ship, and they've taken it to the Empire."

It all felt surreal. The Destiny Sword, the life-force of MacGil Kings for centuries, stolen. In Empire hands. The Ring unprotected. Somehow, he sensed that Gareth was behind it.

Kendrick turned and surveyed the new town wall he had just

built, and realized that it had all had been for nothing. Without the shield, the entire Empire could invade—and nothing, certainly not this town wall—could stop that.

Immediately, Kendrick thought of his family, of Gwendolyn, Reece, Godfrey. He thought of King's Court, vulnerable to attack.

"King's Court must be fortified at once," Kendrick said.

Again, Atme shook his head ominously.

"There has been a rift. Your sister has left King's Court and has taken half the people, the ones we care about. They march now for Silesia. The MacGil kingdom is fractured in two. King's Court is Gareth's domain now. Gwendolyn sent me for you."

"We must to my sister, then," Kendrick said. "To Silesia."

Kendrick surveyed the townsfolk below.

"Without the shield, these folk will be defenseless," he said. "These fortifications are designed to hold against McCloud's troops—not against Andronicus' million man army. These people will never survive an Empire invasion."

Kendrick turned to Atme.

"Go to my sister. Ride ahead of me. Tell her I am coming. I can't return without these people."

Atme's face flashed in concern.

"It is noble of you," he said, "but they will be slow-moving. If you wait to accompany them, you may not reach Silesia in time."

"That is a chance I must take," Kendrick said.

Atme stared at his old friend, and nodded slowly.

"I expected no less," he said. "That is a chance I will take with you. I ride by your side. Always!"

"My lord!" came the panicked voice of the scout, tapping Kendrick on the shoulder.

Kendrick turned and followed his finger as he pointed at the horizon. This time, something distinct came into view.

At first, Kendrick blinked. It was something he had never seen in his entire life. Something which took his breath away—even he, a hardened warrior.

As he watched, the entire horizon morphed to black. It looked as if an army of black ants was slowly covering the globe. It was like all of humanity spilling across the world. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers, wearing the black of the Empire, spread across every inch of the horizon, moving like a swarm towards them.

Andronicus.

His million man army had arrived.

CHAPTER NINE

Gwendolyn was in awe as she looked up at the soaring gates of Silesia, its ancient scarlet stone rising into the sky in an arch, its red iron spiked gates sharp and massive, its meticulously paved red cobblestone road lined with guards in perfect formation, all at attention, all wearing the scarlet red armor of Silesians. It was like entering another world.

Lending it an even more surreal feel was its backdrop, the Canyon right behind it, the endless stretch of open sky, the swirling mists. The city was perched right on the edge of the Canyon, as if balancing on it, half of the city built above ground, and the other half built below, right into the granite cliffs of the Canyon itself. It was like two cities in one. It had survived for centuries, had always been known to be the one insurmountable city in the Ring—and everything Gwen had ever heard about it still did not do it justice. Seeing it now, as an adult, dwarfed even her childhood memories.

Silesia's stone walls rose a hundred feet, were as thick as ten men, and were replete with arrow slits every ten feet, behind which stood a score of Silesian soldiers, bows at the ready. Up top, in the rows of staggered parapets above, were hundreds more soldiers, armed with spears, small boulders, and manning, every twenty feet, huge iron cauldrons, filled with boiling tar. There were even small catapults on the walls, for firing down flaming balls at attackers. This was a city that had been carefully thought through.

Gwen was filled with gratitude that Srog had been loyal to her father all these years: if not, she honestly wondered if her father's men, even the Silver, could take this city. The Silver were the best warriors the world had to offer—yet even so, whether they could breach these walls was another matter entirely.

As Gwen walked through the gates, her heart soared with hope; she felt a surge of optimism, felt that maybe, just maybe, behind these thick walls, perched here on the edge of the Canyon, they could withstand an attack here, even from Andronicus' army. They might not win; but they might be able to hold off just long enough. Long enough for what, she didn't know. Deep in her heart, she hoped beyond hope that maybe Thor would return with the Sword and rescue them all.

"My lady," Srog said graciously, walking beside her through the gates and into the vast courtyard, "my city welcomes you."

From all corners of the immense square, people dressed in red rushed forward and showered Gwendolyn and her men with red rose petals. The people all wore gracious smiles, approaching Gwen and

touching her shoulder, leaning in and kissing her on the cheek, one after the next. She had never been in any place like this; she felt as if she were being embraced by all of them.

"You would think they had no idea that a war is coming to these gates," Gwen said, in awe of their carefree and fearless ways.

"They know," Srog said. "But the Silesians are famous for not giving in to fear. My people might feel it—but they never indulge in it. That is their way. They believe that the person who fears death dies many times, while the one who does not dies but once.

"We are a happy people, content with what life has given us. We don't covet anything that others have. And we are happy with who we are."

More of the masses spilled out, all smiling at Gwen and her entourage, clasping them on the back, welcoming the huge contingent of soldiers and people as if they had been long-lost brothers. Gwen was shocked. She had expected these people to be resentful of their presence; after all, they were digging in for a siege, and here were tons of people who had come to live within their gates, off of their defenses and their rations. Yet, on the contrary, the Silesians still seemed happy to have them here. They were supremely hospitable people.

"There's more to it than the fact that your people don't fear," Gwen said. "They also seem genuinely happy. Even in the face of looming adversity."

"We are a happy people," Srog said. "They say we get it from the canyon air and from the color of our dress," he smiled. Then he turned serious. "But there is more to it than that. They are also happy to see *you*."

"But why?" Gwen asked, baffled.

"King's Court is a sister city and word travels," he explained. "No one here was happy with your brother's reign. They see you as the legitimate heir to the MacGil throne, and they are happy to have a true ruler—not an upstart who has ousted his father. We are a fair and just people, and we want this in our rulers. They want a ruler they deserve, and they see that in you. They do not really care if we all die here, if we are all crushed by the Empire. They only, while they live, want to live justly."

Gwen felt her heart swell at his words; she felt as if, in her, everyone saw something else. For some she was a savior; for others, a prophet; for others, a young girl in over her head; for others, the extension of her father. She was beginning to feel just how much her being ruler meant to others. It was overwhelming. She could not be everything for everyone. She swelled with pride, but also with humility. She felt overcome by the fact that she was representing her

father's name, his honor and memory. And she felt a burden and responsibility to live up to that memory, to be as good of a ruler as he had been. Her father had been like a god to her. She did not know how to rule; she was determined to learn, to try as hard as she could to be as devoted and kind to them as they had been to her.

As they continued deep into the city, a large contingent of warriors stepped forward, dressed in the red armor, and decorated in various metals. Gwen could tell right away that these were Srog's elite.

They stopped to greet her, and the one in the center, a tall thin man with a red beard and glowing green eyes, stepped forward, lowered his head, and held out in his palms a beautiful, silk scarlet cloak, folded neatly.

"My lady," he said softly. "I present this cloak to you on behalf of the Silesian army. It is the mantle of our former lady, and has not been worn in years. It is the sign of the highest respect we can offer. You would honor us to wear it."

Speechless, Gwen reached out and gingerly accepted the mantle; it was the softest piece of clothing she had ever felt, melting in her hands as she unfolded it. She was taken aback by its intricate design, by its shining gold clasp. She draped it around her shoulders and connected the clasp at the base of her throat, and it felt natural. She felt so regal wearing it.

A noise rose up, like a soft cooing noise, and Gwen looked up, scanning the towering walls, the spires rising hundreds of feet into the air, and saw all among them small windows, people dressed in red sticking their heads out, making the noise. As they did, they raised three fingers to their right temple, then slowly pulled them away.

"What are they doing?" Godfrey asked, beside her.

"The salute of the Silesians," Srog explained. "It is a gesture of love. And of respect."

Gwen hardly knew what to say. She'd never felt so loved anywhere in her life. She had also never felt such a sense of responsibility.

There came a slamming of metal, and Gwen turned and saw a dozen soldiers, on both sides of the city gates, close the iron bars as the last of King's Court filtered in. Gwen shuddered at the sound. There was a finality to it. They were in Silesia now. This was their new home. It felt good to be here. But also ominous. In that clang, she could hear themselves steeling themselves for war.

* * *

Gwendolyn sat in the beautiful castle chamber, high up, at the top of Silesia, and reveled in the quiet. It was the first time she had been alone in she did not know how long. Outside, behind the closed door, Srog's men awaited her bidding. But she wouldn't summon them just yet. She wanted a few minutes to herself.

It was a beautiful chamber, this room that had belonged to his late lady, and Gwen rose and paced slowly, taking it all in. Carved of a gorgeous red stone, the floor and walls were all smooth, ancient, worn, the ceilings cresting in dramatic arches. Perched at the top of the castle, facing west, the room overlooked the Canyon, expansive views flooding the room through wide and tall, arched windows.

Gwen looked out, and was in awe at the commanding view. She had never had such a view of the Canyon before, being perched literally on its edge; from here it seemed as if the whole world were the Canyon, one massive hole carved out of the earth, inside of which swirled mists of all colors. It was haunting and beautiful and peaceful and ominous all at the same time.

Gwen looked beyond, to the distant horizon, the Wilds, and in the farthest distance beyond that, she caught the slightest hint of the ocean yellow of the Tartuvian. Her thoughts turned to Thor, and her heart broke. She closed her eyes and prayed with all she had for his safety. She wanted him by her side, now more than ever. She wanted him alive. She wanted him to raise their child with her.

Gwen reached down and placed a palm on her stomach, sensing her baby. She knew it was impossible, so early on, yet still she felt fuller, more of herself. She felt the strength of two people within her.

It had been an overwhelming day, and Gwen was overcome by conflicting emotions as she surveyed the beautiful landscape. She tried to prepare herself mentally to be a leader, prepare herself to ride out what would surely be the most awful siege in the history of the Ring. In some ways, she could not help but feel that this city would be her final resting place.

She tried to shake the gloomy thoughts from her mind. She walked to a small stone fountain, scooped the cold water, and splashed her face several times. The cold gusts of winter whipped into the room and caressed her wet face, stinging her. It felt good. She wanted to be stung. She needed to wake up, to realize where she was, what was about to happen. She needed to stop thinking of herself, to know that it was time to rule, that people were looking to her.

The thought overwhelmed her. She thought of her father, of what he would do, of how he would think. He had taught her to always display an aura of confidence, whether she felt it or not. To make bold decisions. To not show any weakness, any wavering, any hesitation. To give people someone to believe in.

Gwen longed to see her father again, especially at a time like this. She would give anything just to have him there for a few minutes, to advise her. Even just a few sentences. A part of her felt him with her. She heard a screech and looked out the window, and saw a bird disappear into the mist, and she wondered.

Gwen crossed the room, to the spiral stone staircase that twisted and turned its way up to the parapets. In moments she reached the roof of the castle.

Alone up here, feeling the cold gusts of wind, looking out over the Canyon, it was even more breathtaking. She looked every which way for Estopheles, but could not find him.

Gwen walked to the edge of the parapets and looked out over Silesia. She looked down over the edge of the Canyon, and saw the lower half of the city, which she had not toured yet, built down low, hundreds of feet into the Canyon itself. It was breathtaking. She wondered how many Silesians lived down below, how many looked to her to save them. She hoped that she would be able to.

"Hiding again?" came a voice.

Gwen felt an immediate sense of repulsion at the sound of the voice. She turned slowly, but did not need to turn all the way to know who it was. She recognized that voice, and it put a pit in her stomach. As she saw his despicable face, it confirmed her suspicions: Alton.

Gwen couldn't believe it. Here he was, this despicable aristocrat, this excuse of a man, who she hated more than anything; here was the boy who had tried to tear her apart from Thor, who had filled her head with lies, who had plagued her half her life. Somehow the little weasel had followed her caravan here, and somehow he had managed to talk his way past her guards. She was not surprised: he was persistent, relentless, and an excellent liar. And he was very good at convincing others that he was royalty.

Of course, he was not royalty. He was third-class royalty at best, her parents' distant cousin. Yet that didn't stop him from feeling otherwise. She had never met anyone who had felt more entitled.

She flushed with rage. How dare he show up here, of all places, of all times? He had marched up here and had assumed he could just have an audience with her whenever he wanted, and could speak in such casual terms—as if refusing to acknowledge her new post now. His very presence, so brazen, unannounced, was offensive to her.

"What are you doing here?" she asked coldly.

"I tagged along with half of King's Court," he said. "To be with you."

"I doubt that very much," she said, seeing through his lies. "You came to save your life."

Alton shrugged.

“Perhaps I had a duality of purpose. True, Gareth is unhinged, and King’s Court is vulnerable. You could say I was tempted by a certain form of self-preservation.”

He smiled and took a step forward.

“But I also came for you,” he said. “To give you another chance.”

Gwen snorted, outraged by his arrogance.

“To give *me* another chance?” she echoed. “Do you not recognize the lunacy of your words? You can recognize madness in Gareth—but not in yourself?”

Alton shrugged, undeterred.

“The past is the past,” he said. “I forgive you your mistakes. But we both know that whatever happened between us does not apply now. Circumstances have changed. Here you are—a queen without a king, a ruler without a court. Every queen needs a king. Rulers find strength in pairs. Do you really think you can run this great city, rule all these armies by yourself?”

Gwen shook her head. She could not believe how pathetic he was.

“I suppose that you fancy yourself to be the one to come to my rescue, to be my partner to rule?” she asked, mockingly.

“Who else?” he answered proudly, his smile widening. “You and I have known each other since we could walk. We are both royalty. The masses love us both.”

Gwen laughed again.

“Do they?” she asked. “I had no idea that the masses loved you. In fact, I had no idea that they even knew who you were.”

It was Alton’s turn to flush with embarrassment.

Before he could open his mouth again, Gwen held up a hand. She’d had enough. She didn’t have time to waste for this. She had more pressing matters to deal with.

“I don’t want to hear another word,” she said. “I’m not interested in you. I have never been. And I’m certainly not ruling anything with you—not that I think you’re capable of ruling anything. Not even yourself. Not to mention, I am committed to Thor, and he to me. So you can leave now.”

Alton laughed, a short, mocking laugh.

“Is that it?” he asked. “Is that what’s standing between us? Thor? You can’t be serious about him. He has abandoned you, on that foolish little quest of his. He’s deep in the Empire by now, and we both know there is no possibility of return.”

He stepped closer, pleading.

“Admit it, Gwen. You know the truth. You know that he is gone. That he is never coming back. That he has left you alone. So, you see, now there is nothing left between us. Now it is time for us to marry. If not me, then who else? You will be left alone in this world. Don’t be

scared. You can admit your true affections for me."

Gwen seethed.

"I'm only going to say this once," she said slowly. "Listen closely this time, because this is the last time you will ever hear these words. I have no love for you. I don't want to see your face. I don't want to hear your voice. If you come before me again unannounced, I will have you arrested. Now leave me."

With that, Gwen turned her back on him, and took two steps forward, looking back out over the parapets, surveying the Canyon. Her heart was pounding inside, and she prayed that this time he would get the message, would leave, and that she would never see his face again. She was shaking with anger at his presumptuousness, and she didn't want to do anything rash.

Gwen did not hear his footsteps retreating. She was about to turn and look, when suddenly, she felt a strong hand covering her mouth, and another reaching around and grabbing her by the chest. Alton held her tight, even as she struggled, and he was surprisingly strong for a thin and bony boy. He took several steps forward with her, leaning her forward over the edge of the parapet.

Gwen's heart plummeted, as she looked straight down at the fall, and realized how close she was to being pushed over the edge.

"Do you see that drop before you?" Alton cried. "Do you see what I can do? Admit your love for me. Admit it! If you do not, I will—"

Gwen suddenly remembered all that her father's fighters had taught her. She remembered that she wore boots with wooden heels, and she raised a foot high, and stomped down swiftly on Alton's toe.

He screamed out like a girl, losing his grip, and she freed one arm, pulled it forward, and then elbowed him in the solar plexus.

He gasped, and knelt down, wheezing.

Then he looked up at her, death in his eyes, and stood, preparing to charge again.

Gwen reached for the dagger in her belt, prepared to draw it.

But Alton suddenly screamed out and dropped to his knees.

Gwen saw Steffen standing there, and realized he had just punched Alton hard in the small of his back. Steffen grabbed Alton by his hair, pulled his head back to the sky, pulled a dagger from his waist, and held it firmly to Alton's throat.

"Give me word, my lady," Steffen said, "and this piece of trash will be gone from the annals of the MacGils."

"Please, please!" Alton whimpered. "Please don't do this! I didn't mean it. I just wanted to be with you!"

Alton looked pathetic, kneeling there, whimpering, begging for mercy.

"I should have him cut your throat right now," Gwendolyn

seethed, still reeling from being pushed over the edge like that. It scared her to think of how close she had come.

"Please!" Alton pleaded. "You can't kill me! I am royalty after all! It is forbidden for you to touch me!"

There was a sudden commotion and several men burst onto the roof. Srog led the way, along with Kolk, Brom and several members of the Silver. They all ran up to her, and several soldiers grabbed Alton roughly, yanking him to his feet and holding him in place.

"My lady," Srog said, breathing hard, looking embarrassed, "please accept my most humble apologies. Somehow this boy slipped past the guards. He told them he was royalty, that he was related to you."

Gwen was still shaking from the encounter, but she dared not show it.

"I thank you for your concern," she said, trying to use her queenly voice, trying to step into the role they expected of her. "But I am fine. He is but a foolish boy, and Steffen was here to help."

Srog nodded gratefully to Steffen.

"Silesian law demands that any person who lays a hand on a king or queen must be put to death," Srog said.

"NO!" Alton screamed, weeping like a child. "Please! You can't!"

Gwen looked down at him, shaking her head. As pathetic as he was, she couldn't stand the thought of killing him—even if he deserved it.

"My lord," Gwen replied to Srog, "I am new here, so I ask a favor. This one time, I would ask to bend your law. In this one case I do not wish to have him killed. I would rather some lesser form of judgment."

"As you will, my lady," he said. "What did you have in mind?"

Gwen thought, trying to devise a way to rid Alton from her life for good.

"Well, seeing as this boy claims he is royalty, let's give him the royal right of fighting with the soldiers. Give Alton armor and weapons, and send him out in the field with the common troops to fight on the front lines."

"No, my lady!" Alton screamed. "I am not a fighter!"

"Then you shall learn to be one," Gwen said. "Maybe you can take your martial skills out on our enemy, instead of on a defenseless girl. Take him away," Gwendolyn ordered.

The guards rushed to do her bidding, dragging Alton away as he screamed in protest the entire way.

"A wise decision my lady," Srog said in admiration.

"My lady, onto more important matters," Brom stepped forward. "We are receiving reports of the mobilization of Andronicus' army. It

is hard to separate truth from rumor. But if most reports be true, we may not have as much time to prepare as we think. We must make our final preparations and lock down this city immediately."

"This city was built with an outer layer of defense," Srog added, "built for times like this. We can seal up our outer gates as well—but once we do, they cannot be opened. No one can come in or out."

Gwen thought; she knew they needed to prepare, but she wasn't ready to seal the city just yet.

"My brother Kendrick is still out there," she said. "And so is Thorgrin and the other brave Legion members. I don't want to seal the city until they've had a chance to arrive."

"Yes, my lady," Srog said.

Gwendolyn hoped beyond hope that Thor could return before they sealed the city gates; yet she knew, with a pang of sadness, that that would likely be impossible. She hated the idea of shutting him out.

"My lady, there is one more matter," Srog added, clearing his throat, hesitating. "This city was built with escape tunnels, deep beneath the surface. If we are in dire circumstances, there is a way for a few of us to get out. For *you* to get out. If we are completely surrounded, and our fortifications give way, Andronicus will destroy us all. We can get you to safety. Beyond the walls. Far from here."

Gwendolyn was touched by the offer, but slowly, she shook her head.

"I'm deeply grateful," she said, "but I would never abandon any of you. Or this city. You have taken me in. I will treat it as my home. If Silesia goes down, we will all go down together. There will be no escape. Not for me."

The men all looked at her with a new look, and she could see the respect in their eyes. For the first time, she was beginning to feel like a ruler. A true ruler. This was what it meant to rule, she felt. To lead by example.

Gwendolyn turned and looked out over the Canyon, at the swirling mists, lit up by the setting sun, and she thought once again, of Thor.

Please Thor, she willed. *Come home to me.*

CHAPTER TEN

Thor followed the boy closely, the others beside him, as they all finally emerged from the thick foliage of the jungle, the second sun long in the sky. It had been an arduous hike back up from the bottom of the crater, where the mudslide had taken them. It had felt as if they would never stop sliding, Thor and the others completely covered in mud as they slid hundreds of feet into a huge mud pit. They'd had to fight their way back up to the top, and it had taken too long.

Now it was almost dark, the boy more anxious than ever, constantly watching the sky, and the boy seemed immensely relieved as they entered the large clearing in the jungle, the first that Thor had seen. For a while he had been sure that they'd never surface from that mud pit—and that they'd never get out of this jungle.

Thor was surprised to see the large clearing before them, perhaps a hundred feet in each direction, and in the center of it, a small cottage. Smoke rose from its chimney, which Thor could understand, since the temperature had plummeted over the last hour, as night began to fall. It was startling to see this cottage here, a dwelling in the midst of such a vast wilderness, bordered by trees that reached into the sky. Thor and the others exchanged a look of wonder. Who could live here, Thor wondered, in this lone house in the midst of this wilderness? It was so unexpected.

"My grandpa doesn't take to most people," the boy said, turning to them. "Wait here, let me speak to him. Hopefully we'll catch him in a good mood and he'll let you stay the night here."

"Thanks," Thor said, "but we don't need to stay the night here—"

Before he could finish speaking, the boy was gone, entering his grandpa's house.

As they sky grew darker, strange night birds began to make all sorts of noises. Thor leaned back and looked up at the towering trees, reaching into the sky; they climbed so high, he could barely even see the top, and he felt overwhelmed by the immensity of nature here.

There came a sudden shouting from inside the cottage, and Thor looked at the others, shifting uncomfortably, and wondered what to do. On the one hand, he did not want to stay the night here—he wanted to keep moving. Yet he also wanted to meet this old man and find out if he knew anything about the Sword before moving on.

The door slammed open and out came a middle-aged man, ducking his head at the doorway. He was bald, with graying hair on both sides, a big nose, narrow brown eyes and a double chin, and was dressed in robes, frayed, hardly better than rags. He stopped before the group and stared directly at Thor, clearly annoyed.

“What right did you have to press my grandson to bring you here?” he demanded, angry.

“We did not press your grandson to do anything!” Thor protested. “He offered to take us—”

“And how am I supposed to know that you are not of the Empire?” the man pressed, reaching down and gripping the hilt of his sword, resting at his waist.

Thor and the others instinctively reached for their weapons, too, as they did not know exactly how belligerent this man would be.

“Your dress seems to show you’re not from here,” the old man said, “but what if it’s all a trick? What if you are spies for the Empire?”

Thor sensed that the best way to deal with this wary old man was through kindness, and he raised his hands innocently and took a step forward.

“Sir, we mean no offense,” he said, in as gentle tone as he could muster. “We are not spies of the Empire. We have come here from the Ring. We seek a certain sword which was stolen from our kingdom. We mean you no harm. And if you wish to tell us which direction it was heading, we will be on our way. If you do not, then we shall just leave now, and leave you in peace. In any case, we thank your grandson for his kindness in saving us. We owe him a great debt.”

The man stared Thor up and down earnestly for quite a while, then finally his hand relaxed; he let go of the hilt of his sword, and his face relaxed, too.

“I hear it in your voice,” the man said. “That accent. You are indeed of the Ring. It has been years, too many years, since I’ve been there. A beautiful place. I miss it dearly.”

The man surveyed all of them, then finally relaxed his shoulders.

“Forgive my haste in accusing you,” he added. “We live alone out here, and one can never be too sure. Welcome. I wish for you to stay. Come quickly now,” he said, gesturing with his hands, looking out at the trees as if afraid something might attack them.

Thor looked at Reece and the others, who looked back and nodded, and as one, they all filed into the man’s cottage, as he followed and closed the door, barring it behind them with a large metal pole.

“Sit, please,” the old man said as he entered, tidying up.

Thor surveyed the cozy cottage, and saw that it was roomy, enough to hold all of them. The floors were lined with furs, a small fire roared in the fireplace, and it smelled of food, making Thor’s stomach growl. Krohn must have smelled it, too, because he began to whine.

The boy hastened to do his grandfather’s bidding, hurrying over

with a platter of fruits that Thor did not recognize. Thor and the others each grabbed one, and as Krohn whined, the boy took a piece off the platter, leaned down, and fed it to him. Krohn snatched it from his hand, wolfed it down, made a funny face, licked his lips several times, then whined for more. The boy laughed.

Thor examined his piece of fruit. It looked like a fig, but was much bigger, red in color, and covered in a sort of moss.

"What is it?" Thor asked.

"It's a mooless," the boy said.

"Try it," the grandfather chimed in. "It's bitter but also sweet. It will give you energy after your long hike."

Thor raised it to his nose, and it smelled unlike anything he had ever encountered—like an onion crossed with a lemon. He could feel from his fingertips that it was sticking to his hand, and as the others, he lifted it and took a tentative bite.

He was struck by the taste: it was delicious, and even this small bite gave him a burst of energy. He gobbled it down and licked his fingers, and already felt like a new man.

Thor sat with the others on the pile of furs on the floor, spread out around the fire, Krohn coming up beside him, and resting his head in Thor's lap. Thor was surprised at how good it felt to sit, the achiness in his legs slowly subsiding. He had not realized how long they had been on their feet, how much his muscles hurt. They were also all bruised from their encounter with that animal. These furs were so soft and comfortable, Thor felt as if he could fall asleep sitting up.

But he thought of the Ring, under attack, and knew they had urgent business to attend to, and did not want to waste any time. He leaned forward.

"We are most grateful for your hospitality," Thor said to the old man, "but I'm afraid we haven't much time. We are on an urgent journey. We must find the Sword. Please, tell us where it went so we can be on our way."

The old man took a seat, leaning back on a fur on the other side of the fire, beside the boy, and he looked back at them and shook his head.

"You can't go back out there," he said. "Not now. Haven't you seen? The second sun is about to set."

"I told them papa!" the boy said.

"We appreciate your caution," Thor said, "but as I said, we have urgent business, and we do not fear insects."

The old man snorted.

"You don't understand," he said. "No one can be out there at night. *No one*. You would not last an hour. After nightfall, sometime during the rising of the first moon, the rains come. No one can survive

outside during the rains."

"And why couldn't one survive a rainfall?" Reece pressed.

The man turned and narrowed his eyes at him.

"Because it is not a rainfall," he said. "It is not water that falls from the sky, boy, but Ethabugs."

"Ethabugs?" Elden asked.

"A kind of spider, but larger and more deadly. In this part of the Empire, the sky rains them, every night. You'll hear them falling against our cottage. It will last for about an hour, then they scurry on their way. But if you are outside during that time, without shelter, you'd be finished. I've seen a grown elephant devoured by those things in five minutes. No, you will stay here. At first light, you can go."

Thor and the others exchanged a look of wonder, and he marveled at how different this place was. As he thought about it, he realized he was exhausted, and while his mind was in a rush to go, his body was not. His friends looked exhausted, too, and he did not blame them. Thor realized that being a good leader sometimes meant inspiring your people to go on—but sometimes it also meant allowing them to rest. And if this old man was not exaggerating—and Thor suspected he was not—then he was grateful to have found this shelter, and for the man's hospitality. He didn't want to contemplate what might have happened if they had been outside during that time.

"Then we are most grateful for your warning, and for your hospitality," Thor said. "Thank you for having us."

The old man shrugged.

"It's nice to have company once in a while. Especially from the Ring. I spent the better part of my youth there. Lovely place."

Thor's eyes opened wide in surprise; this man had been to the Ring?

"And then what are you doing here?" O'Connor asked.

The man looked down, waited several seconds, and lapsed into silence.

"I'm sorry," O'Connor said. "I didn't mean to pry."

The old man remained silent for a while more, then finally, took a deep breath.

"I was young, a tragedy struck in my life. I thought the best thing to do was to start clean. I thought I'd head out west, beyond the Canyon, sail across the Tartuvian for the Empire, head into the wilds. I suppose at the time a part of me had been hoping to get killed. My woes engulfed me, and it was the easy way out.

"But that did not turn out to be the case. Somehow, I survived. And then I grew fond of surviving. I have lived here alone, for all these years—until the arrival of my grandson. Now I have something

to live for. And despite all the animals, I have grown to like it here. I have traveled across the entire Empire, have seen places and things you can hardly imagine. It is a vast, vast Empire, dwarfing the Ring in comparison. You have not lived until you've seen it all. Not just the Empire proper, and not just the islands. But also the Land of the Dragons. And the Land of the Druids."

"The Land of the Druids?" Thor asked, sitting up, shaking off his sleepiness. "Have you been there?"

The man nodded.

"As close as you can come. It is a magical place. There are many magical places in the Empire. It has all been ruined by Andronicus, by his army, which is everywhere. His patrols are ever-present, which is why I had to come out here, deep in the jungle. Anyone caught by them is captured and taken either as a soldier or as a slave. His army of slaves is in fact bigger than his army of soldiers. He has to dominate everything, every last soul."

The old man sighed.

"I have gotten quite good at hiding from his men. They have never caught me—and they never will. Or my grandson. I want it that way. That's why I'm wary of new visitors, like yourself. I don't want anyone to give me away."

Thor and the others looked at each other, taken aback by the man's story.

"Can you tell us what you know of the Sword?" Thor asked.

The man looked long at Thor, then finally looked away.

"I saw a dozen men the other day. Also from the Ring. They moved awkwardly through the jungle. They were accompanied by several warriors, a formidable force. They left a broad trail. Easy to follow. Although of course the jungle consumes itself every day, so unless a trail is fresh it will disappear. But I watched them. I know where they went."

"And where was that?" Reece asked.

Thor thought he saw something like fear in the man's eyes.

"They took the road to Slave City."

"Slave City?" Elden echoed.

The old man nodded.

"About ten miles west of here. We're at the edge of the jungle here. There's only one road there. But I warn you: Slave City is aptly named. There are hundreds of thousands of them. All indentured servants, all serving Andronicus. And just as many guards. Venture there, and you won't get out."

"But why would they take the Sword there?" Conval asked.

"I didn't say they were taking it there," he said. "I said they were heading down that road. They could be going anywhere."

“Then we shall follow them at first light,” Thor said.

The old man shook his head.

“To enter Slave City is to give yourself up for capture. Especially with such a small fighting force as your own. It’s suicide.”

“We have no choice,” Thor insisted. “We have come to find the Sword. And we must follow wherever it went.”

The old man lowered his head and shook it sadly.

“Will you show us the way?” Thor asked. “In the morning?”

“It’s your death,” the old man said. “I can show you how to get anywhere.”

Satisfied, Thor leaned back onto the furs—but as he stretched his arm, he suddenly felt it singed, and he yanked it back quickly, crying out in pain.

He turned and looked, expecting to see a fire, but he saw none. He wondered what happened, how he had gotten hurt.

“I told you to close those shutters boy!” the old man yelled.

The boy ran over to Thor and quickly closed the wooden shutters beside him. As Thor watched, he realized he had been sitting beside an open window. Thor was puzzled as he looked down at his arm, which had a slight burn mark on it.

“What singed my arm?” he asked.

“The moonlight,” the boy answered.

“Moonlight?” Thor asked, shocked.

“It’s strong in these parts. Never put yourself directly in its light. It burns you.”

“It’s only the first moon that burns you,” the old man added. “It wanes in a couple of hours, after the spiders leave. The second one is fine to walk under.”

Thor rubbed his arm, leaning back, and he wondered at this place. He felt a million miles away from home. A part of him felt as if he would never return.

“Fetch the meat,” the old man commanded, and the boy crossed the cottage and appeared with a heaping platter, overflowing with meats.

Thor and the others—especially Krohn—all perked up, opening their sleepy eyes and leaning forward. Thor dared not ask what sort of meat this was, hardly knowing the names of any of the animals out here anyway. But it smelled delicious, and as the boy brought it closer, Krohn smacked his lips and whined. The boy laughed and served Krohn first, ripping off a hunk and throwing it through the air; he laughed harder as Krohn snatched it. Krohn wagged his tail as he carried it off to a corner of the room and chewed.

Thor smiled as he and the others used the sticks to lift a piece from the platter. The boy and the old man did the same, and all of

them settled back, eating contentedly by the fire. Thor took a bite and was surprised by how flavorful it was—and by how tough the meat was. He felt his energy returning as he chewed.

The boy then carried over a sack of wine and goblets, handing one out to each, and filling them. Thor drank, and the strong liquid went right to his head.

With his full belly, the strong wine and the warm fire relaxing him, Thor felt himself getting sleepy. But he shook it off. He was leader of this group, and he could not let himself go to sleep just yet. He wanted to make sure the others were asleep first.

As they all sat around, the room fell into a comfortable silence. Soon, the room was punctuated by the sounds of the old man snoring; the boy giggled. Krohn came back over to Thor, rested his head in his lap, and closed his eyes and slept, too.

Thor and his brothers remained awake, wide-eyed, each staring into the fire. They had each seen too much today, and all of them, despite their exhaustion, were on-edge. There was a somber, unspoken silence amongst them, as if they all knew they were on a journey that must lead to their deaths.

"You ever think about how different life was before we joined the Legion?" O'Connor asked.

"What's the point of thinking that now?" Elden asked.

O'Connor shrugged.

"Sometimes I think about what I left behind," O'Connor said. "Not that I regret it. I just wonder about it. How life would have turned out differently. Sometimes I miss my hometown. My family, you know? I guess I miss my sister most of all. She's two years younger. Now, with the shield down and the Empire invading, I think of her, alone back there. I don't know if I will see her again."

"If we make it back in time," Thor said, "we will rescue her."

O'Connor brooded, looking unconvinced.

"I wanted to be a blacksmith," Elden said. "My father, he drove me to the Legion. He had tried himself, as a boy, and he couldn't get in. He wanted me to achieve what he could not. I'm glad that I did. My life would have been much smaller had I not. I wouldn't have seen half the things I have."

"We had brides waiting for us back in our hometown," Conval said. "We were both engaged to be married. A double wedding. The Legion changed that. They said they would wait for us."

"But we doubt they will," Conven said.

Thor thought about it, and realized that he didn't miss anyone or anything from his hometown. The Legion was his life, completely his life. And he could see in the eyes of the others that it was their life, too. They had become more than friends—they had become true

brothers. They were all that each other had.

"I don't speak to my family anymore," Elden said.

"Nor do I," said O'Connor.

"We are each other's family now," said Reece.

Thor realized it was true.

There came a sudden sound patter on the roof, like hail. It grew louder, and Thor and the others looked to the ceiling with alarm, sounding as if it would cave in. The old man and the boy woke and looked up, too.

"The rains," the old man remarked.

The sound was terrifying, all-consuming; it sounded as if the sky were raining small rocks. Making matters worse, the sound was accompanied by a horrific, squealing noise of thousands of insects. It sounded as if the animals were chewing on the roof and trying to get in. Thor looked up and was grateful for the barrier protecting them from the outside, so grateful that this man had not let them stay the night in the jungle.

After what felt like hours, finally, the noise stopped, and the hissing faded. The boy jumped to his feet, crossed the cottage, opened the door and looked out.

"It's safe now," he said.

They all jumped up as one, hurried to the door and looked out.

In the distance, Thor could see thousands of huge black insects crawling away from them, heading into the jungle.

"The moonlight is safe now, too," the boy said. "You see—it's the second moon. You can tell by the purple light."

Thor walked outside, breathing the cold, night air, the jungle filled with soft night noises, and he searched the blackness in wonder.

"It's safe for now, but don't stay out long," said the boy.

Reece came out and joined Thor, as the boy hurried back inside and closed the cottage door behind them. The two of them stood out there, looking up into the sky, at the large purple moon, at the twinkling red stars. This place was even more fantastical than Thor had imagined.

"We might die tomorrow," Reece said, looking up at the sky.

"I know," Thor said. He had been thinking the same exact thing. The odds against them seemed impossible.

"If we do, I want you to know that you're my brother," Reece said to him. "My *true* brother."

Reece looked at him meaningfully, and Thor reached out and clasped his forearm.

"As you are mine," Thor said.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hafold hurried through the Queen's chamber, preparing her morning meal, as she had done every day during her thirty five years in the Queen's service. Hafold was a precise woman, and she stuck to her schedule like clockwork, crossing the stone chamber as she prepared the queen's porridge.

On this day, though, she walked twice as fast. For the first time in all her years of service, she was late. She had tossed and turned all night with obscure, ominous dreams, the first nightmares of her life. She had seen King's Court rise up in flames, people burned alive, screaming all around her.

By the time she had awakened, the first sun was already high in the sky, and Hafold had leapt from her bed, embarrassed. She felt awful at the thought of having made the Queen wait, at arriving at such a late hour. Typically Hafold arrived first, followed by the Queen's second maidservant, who brought the late morning tea. Now Hafold would have the shame of arriving at the time of the second server. Hafold did not suffer incompetence in others, and she detested it in herself.

Hafold tucked her head, doubled her pace, and held the tray firmly in her trembling hands, hoping the Queen would not be upset with her. Of course, given the Queen's catatonic state, she was hardly capable of expressing pleasure or displeasure. But Hafold could sense the Queen's smallest movements. After so many years, the Queen was like a mother and a sister and a daughter to her, all rolled in one. She felt more protective of her than anyone in King's Court—than anyone in her own family.

Hafold turned the corner, thinking of ways she could make it up to the Queen, and as she raised her head she caught sight of her in the distance, sitting in her chair by the window, staring out with blank eyes as she had for weeks now. There, beside her, stood her second maidservant, tea in hand, right on time; she was a young girl, new to King's Court, and she poured her tea meticulously into a shining gold cup.

Hafold did not want to disturb them, and so she walked quietly, creeping up behind them without a sound, her soft socks lining her noise on the stone floor. As she neared, prepared to announce herself, she suddenly stopped. Something was wrong.

Hafold watched the maidservant reach quickly into her vest, extract a small sack, spill a white powder into the queen's tea, then stow it back inside her pocket. She then handed the cup to the Queen, holding it in her limp hand and guiding her to drink it, as she always

had.

Hafold's heart flooded with terror; she dropped her silver platter, the delicate plates crashing to the floor, and raced for the Queen. She reached up and smacked the cup away from her lips. Just in time, she sent the delicate china shattering to the floor.

The serving girl jumped back, looking at Hafold with eyes three times as wide, and Hafold pounced on her, grabbing her roughly by her shirt, yanking open her vest, and pulling out the sack filled with powder. She smelled it, touched the tip of her finger to it and tasted it. She snarled at the girl, who looked absolutely terrified.

"Niamroot," Hafold said knowingly. "Why are you feeding this to the Queen? Do you know what this does to a person?"

The girl stared back dumbly, trembling.

Hafold's fury deepened. This was a toxic poison, one designed to kill the brain slowly. Why was this maidservant giving it to her? Looking at how young and stupid she looked, Hafold realized someone else was behind it.

"Who put you up to this?" Hafold pressed, grabbing her more tightly. "Who made you poison our queen? How long has this been going on? ANSWER ME!" she shrieked, reaching back and smacking the girl all her might.

The girl cried out, her body shaking, and between sobs, she said, "The King! The King made me do it! He threatened me. They are his orders. I'm sorry!"

Hafold shook with rage. Gareth. The Queen's own son. Poisoning his mother. The thought of it made her sick to her stomach.

"How long?" Hafold asked, suddenly wondering how much of the Queen's condition had to do with the stroke.

The girl cried.

"Since her husband's death. I'm sorry. I didn't know. He said it was for her health."

"Stupid girl," Hafold shrieked, and threw her halfway across the room. The girl screamed, stumbled, and ran from the chamber, sobbing as she went.

Hafold knelt down beside her Queen, and examined her in a whole new light. From all her years as a nurse, Hafold knew exactly what Niamroot could do—and she also knew how to heal it. Its effects were not permanent, if caught in time.

Hafold pulled the Queen's eyelids low, saw the yellowish color beneath them, and confirmed she was a victim of this poison. Hafold felt certain that this was why she had been catatonic. It was not from mourning her late husband. It was from being poisoned by her son.

She had to hand it to Gareth: he had chosen the perfect timing to poison her, to make it seem to the world as if his mother were merely

in mourning. He was even more devious than she had thought.

Hafold crossed the chamber, rifled through each drawer of her medicine chest, and found the yellow liquid that she needed. With trembling hands she mixed a drop in a cup of water, then hurried back and put it to the Queen's mouth, forcing her to drink.

The Queen drank and drank, shaking her head, trying to stop, but Hafold forced her to drink the whole thing.

After the Queen, protesting, emptied the cup, finally, the Queen shook her head and reached up and pushed Hafold's hand away.

Hafold was shocked and delighted. It was the first time the Queen had raised her hand in weeks.

"What are you making me drink?" the Queen demanded.

Hafold leapt in joy at the sound of her voice, her first words, realizing she was back. She reached out and hugged the queen—the first time she had hugged her in her thirty five years of serving her.

The Queen, back to her old self, indignant, stood and gasped.

"My Queen, my Queen!" Hafold cried. "You've come back to me!"

The Queen shoved Hafold off, her old proud self.

"What do you speak of?" the Queen demanded. "Come back where?"

"You've been poisoned," Hafold explained. "Gareth has poisoned you!"

The Queen's eyes widened slowly, in recognition, and suddenly, she understood.

"Bring me to him," the Queen commanded.

* * *

Queen MacGil marched down the corridors of King's Court, corridors she knew too-well, Hafold beside her, feeling herself again. For the first time in she did not know how long she felt aware, filled with energy. She also felt infused with rage, and eager to confront her son.

With every step she took, the more she was beginning to come back to herself, the more it was dawning on her what exactly had happened, the role her son had played. It made her sick, and a part of her still did not want to believe it. What could she have done so wrong to raise such a monster?

"My Queen, this is not such a good idea," Hafold said beside her. "We should leave this place at once, flee while we can. Who knows how Gareth might react—he might have you killed. We must get far from this place. We must go to Silesia, to Gwendolyn. You will be cared for there."

“Not until I speak to my son,” she said.

Nothing would keep the queen from knowing the truth, from hearing the words from Gareth himself. Queen MacGil had never been one to back away from a confrontation, and she was not about to begin now—and certainly not from her own son.

The Queen slammed open the familiar door to her late husband’s study, resentful that her son could think he could occupy it. She gasped as she stood at the threshold of the room, horrified at the sight of the place, her late husband’s precious books and scrolls scattered and torn on the floor, the room in shambles, destroyed.

There, across the room, sitting slumped in a chair, looking up at her with an impervious smile, was her son.

Gareth sat in the center of all of this, and looked up at her with black, soulless eyes. She could smell the faint odor of opium in the air. He hadn’t shaved in days, there were dark bags beneath his eyes, his clothes were soiled, and he looked as if he’d gone mad. He looked nothing like the son she had mothered, the boy she had raised. Being king had aged him twenty years, and she almost did not recognize him.

“Mother,” he said flatly, hardly looking surprised to see her. “You have finally come to see me.”

The Queen scowled down at him

“What have you done to my husband’s study?” she demanded.

Gareth laughed.

“I don’t think he’ll be needing it now,” Gareth said, “but I find it quite an improvement, don’t you?”

The queen stormed forward.

“Did you poison me?” she asked.

Gareth stared back, expressionless.

“We found the powder, today, on the servant girl, my lord,” Hafold interjected. “She said you commanded her to.”

“Is it true?” the queen asked softly, hoping it was not.

Gareth slowly shook his head.

“Mother mother mother,” he said. “Why should you take a sudden concern to me now, after all these years? When I was young, you reserved all of your love for Reece. Kendrick was the best of all of us, but you couldn’t bring yourself to love him because he was your husband’s bastard. Godfrey disappointed you in his taverns. Luanda had one foot out the door and was no threat to you. And Gwendolyn—well, she was a girl, and you were too threatened to love her.

“So Reece found your love. And the rest of us were looked over. I did not exist for you. It took my doing all of this for you to finally acknowledge me.”

The Queen’s scowl deepened; she was in no mood for Gareth’s

sophistry.

"Is it true?" she repeated.

Gareth chuckled.

"The truth has many layers, doesn't it?" he said. "What would it matter if you were poisoned? Your life had turned a corner, you were inching towards the grave. A queen without a king. I can't think of anything more useless."

Queen MacGil felt a rage boiling up inside. She felt sick to her stomach.

"You are an abomination of a son," she spat back at him. "An abomination of a human being. I'm sorry I ever had you."

"I know that you are, mother," he said calmly. "I've known that since the day you had me. But you see, there's nothing you can do about it now. Because finally, I am free from your reach, from father's reach. Now, I command you," he said loudly, standing, his face turning red with anger. "Now, you are *my* subject. And with the snap of my fingers, I can have an attendant kill you. Your life is at my mercy."

"Do it then," she seethed back, unafraid, equally determined. "Don't be the cowardly boy you've always been. Be a *man*, as your father was, and have me killed face-to-face. Better yet, draw the sword and do the deed yourself."

Gareth sat there, trembling.

"You can't do it, can you?" she asked. "No. Instead, you have your little attendant run around and poison me slowly. You are a coward. You always have been. You are a disgrace to your father's memory."

Gareth suddenly reached into his belt, drew a dagger, raised it high and charged for his mother with a horrific scream. As he neared, he brought the blade down, right for her face.

But Queen MacGil was the daughter of a King and wife to another. She had been around violence her entire life, had been trained by the royal guard from the time she could walk. As Gareth charged, she calmly reached over, grabbed a stone bust of her husband, waited until he got close, then stepped aside and swung it for Gareth's head.

She connected perfectly, dodging his blade and impacting his skull, sending him crashing back into a wooden table, knocking it over as he collapsed and slumped against the wall.

Gareth lay there, breathing hard, bleeding from his head, and blinked several times. He tried to sit up, dazed, and wiped the blood from the back of his mouth. At least it had wiped the smile from his face.

"I'm through with you," the queen said down to him, coldly.

“From this day forward, you are not my son. I want you to know that. You are not even a stranger. You are nothing to me. I will leave this place, and never come back as long as you rule. I know now, with certainty, that it was you who took my husband from me. And for that, you will rot in hell. “Don’t think you will not pay. I’ve been told the shield is down. Soon the Empire’s men will flood this place and burn it to the ground—and you will burn with them.”

Gareth suddenly laughed, blood pouring from his lips.

“I doubt that, mother,” he said. “Many people have tried to kill me. But they do not succeed. This morning my royal taster dropped dead before my eyes—another unsuccessful plot on my life. And yesterday I learned that the closest to me will come to kill me tomorrow at dawn. I have no allies. But I have spies. And I have the devil on my side. You see, no one has ever been able to kill me, mother. And no one ever will. And I am always one step ahead of them, mother. That is the one thing you never understood about me. I am always one step ahead.”

Gareth laughed, shaking, and Queen MacGil had enough.

She turned and stormed from the room, Hafold beside her, and slammed it behind her, hearing her son’s laughter echo and knowing it was the last time she would ever step foot in King’s Court again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Gwendolyn skipped through a summer field of flowers, bursting with color, her father, young and vibrant and healthy, by her side. She was young, perhaps ten, and he threw her up into the air and swung her as they skipped. She laughed hysterically, thrilled to be here with him. He laughed back, so carefree, a deep, reassuring sound. She felt so safe, so secure in the world, as if nothing could ever change.

The field was flooded with sunlight, brighter than she had ever seen, and as she looked at him, he looked younger and happier than she had ever seen him.

"I'm so proud of you, my child," he said to her.

He reached down and picked her up, grabbing her by the arms and lifting her up high into the air, just as he did when she was a baby, grinning widely. She laughed, exhilarated.

But as he put her down, as her feet touched the ground, she looked down and realized that everything had changed. Before the ground had been covered in flowers—now it was black dirt; before there had been a clear, bright sky—now it was dark and cloudy; before there had been flowers—now they were replaced with a field of thorns.

And worst of all, her father was missing, and she was alone.

Gwendolyn heard a shrill cry, that of a baby; she turned and in the distance, atop a small hill, she saw a bassinet, lodged inside a thorn bush. The cries grew louder, and she approached it tentatively, knowing somehow that it was her son.

A boy.

She reached the bassinet and leaned in and looked—and was overwhelmed by the beauty of the child. Light shone from him, and she could not help thinking that he looked just like her.

She reached down to lift the baby up, but suddenly the bassinet moved. A strong current of water came rushing beside her, and carried the bassinet down a winding mountain trail.

Gwen ran after it, but it was no use. The bassinet flew too quickly, and soon the landscape before her changed to a vast sea.

Gwen found herself standing on a rocky coastline, looking out at a brewing storm.

"NO!" she screamed, reaching out for her baby, wading into the water.

But it was no use. The baby was already far out to sea, carried out on the tide, crying in his bassinet. Gwendolyn felt more helpless than she ever had. She wanted the ocean to take her away, too.

Gwen began to notice a great bubbling, at the surface of the

water, and moments later, a huge beast emerged, screeching.

A dragon.

The dragon rose higher and higher, the biggest thing she'd ever seen, like a wall before her, blocking out the sky. It leaned back its head and roared, and the sound was the most terrifying she had experienced.

Behind it, a tidal wave suddenly appeared, fifty feet high, rushing at her.

She tried to turn to run, but it was too late.

The wave rushed forward, carrying the dragon with it, ready to crash down and kill her.

Gwendolyn awoke, sitting straight up in a bed she did not recognize, in a room she did not know, breathing hard and looking all around, trying to remember where she was. The light of the first rising sun was breaking through the window, and she jumped to her feet, crossed the room, dressed quickly and splashed cold water on her face from a small stone bowl on the far side of the chamber. She ran the cold water across her scalp and through her hair. She shook her head, trying to shake the awful visions, trying to snap herself back to reality. Reality was dark enough as it was—she didn't need a nightmare to make it worse.

The dream had seemed too real. Her father; the baby; the ocean; the dragon; the world turning so dark. She couldn't help but feel as if it boded awful things to come.

Gwendolyn stood beside the large, open-air window and looked down at the shining city of Silesia; people were already out, this early in the day, preparing their goods for a day of sale. As she looked over the citizens, she also noticed movement, could see them congregating towards the city gate. She followed their direction and spotted a small cloud of dust on the horizon, slowly heading for Silesia, and she realized it was a rider, charging this way. Two riders. And behind them, a group of perhaps a hundred townsfolk.

Gwen relaxed, realizing it was not Andronicus' army; yet she wondered who it could be. A distant horn sounded, and Gwen saw the gatekeeper stand tall and blow it again and again.

As Gwen examined the rider out front, slowly coming into focus, she recognized his armor, his horse.

There came a soft knocking on her chamber door, and Gwen spun and crossed the room, and opened the door to see an attendant standing there, bowing at her presence.

"My Queen, I am sorry to disturb you," he said. "But our men have spotted two riders approaching our gates, with an entourage of people. Should I close the gates?"

She shook her head.

“No,” she said. “That is no ordinary rider.”

Her heart filled with joy as she prepared to leave the castle.

“That,” she said, “is my brother.”

* * *

Gwendolyn took the steps three at a time, excited as she bounded down the spiral stone staircase of the castle, through the corridors and out the front door. She raced across the courtyard, for the main gate, where she saw Kendrick arrive, Atme at his side. Her heart flooded with relief. It was like a piece of her was back home again. With her family so broken, so dysfunctional, having Kendrick here made her feel a bit of normalcy back again.

It was ironic: Kendrick was her half-brother, yet he felt more like family to her than her real siblings. She knew she would have to make some hard decisions as queen, but she hadn’t known how she would possibly be able to order the gates closed and sealed knowing he was still out there. It saved her a heart-wrenching decision.

As she ran for the gates, Kendrick spotted her, dismounted and ran to her, embracing her. She was so happy to see him again. A part of her felt that, if Kendrick made it back, maybe Thor could, too.

“You’re alive,” she said over his shoulder, a tear running down her cheek. “I’m so happy you’re alive.”

He pulled her back, grinning wide; it felt so good to see another living member of her family, here in this foreign city. He was also the striking image of her father, and seeing him made her feel as if she had a small piece of her father back again.

“I am,” he said. “Always. I was told of your travels to this place, of everything that has happened. I am so proud of you for leading these people. They could have picked no finer a leader.”

She smiled, flushed with pride. Coming from Kendrick, whom everyone respected, who was eminently qualified to be the next King, it was high praise indeed.

“These people do not have me to thank for making them safe,” she responded humbly. “I am sure they would have found a way to be safe either way.”

Kendrick shook his head.

“They needed a leader. Someone to guide them. You led the way. Many people will live because of you.”

“And I see those people following you, as well,” she said, nodding over his shoulder as the hundreds of townsfolk following Kendrick and Atme caught up and began to enter the gates.

Kendrick’s face fell in concern.

“I’m afraid I bear bad news,” he said. “We spotted Andronicus’ army. They march our way.”

Gwen’s eyes opened in alarm.

“Are you sure of it?” she asked.

“As sure as it is day,” came a voice.

Gwen turned to see Atme coming up beside Kendrick, looking back with concern. He reached out and took her hand and kissed her fingertips. “My lady,” he added. “I fulfilled the mission.”

Gwen smiled.

“You have brought my brother back to me alive,” she said. “For that, I shall always be indebted. I know who I shall turn to next time I have a mission of the utmost urgency.”

“You trusted me with a most sacred mission, with your family’s life, and for that I will always be grateful,” Atme replied, nodding back.

There came a commotion and Gwen turned to see Srog, Brom and Kolk approach, flanked by several members of the Silver. They all lit up at the sight of Kendrick, hurried over and embraced him.

“Kendrick,” Brom said, clasping his forearm. “You serve the Silver well in all that you do.”

“My Lord,” Kendrick said back to him.

“You bring much honor upon your father’s memory,” Kolk said.

Kendrick met his embrace.

“It is an honor to have a knight of your repute in Silesia,” Srog said, their forearms clasping firmly.

“The honor is all mine, my Lords,” Kendrick said back. “In fact, I owe you a great debt for taking in my sister and half of King’s Court.”

“The debt is mine,” Srog said. “It the least we can do to honor your father, who was always good to us. He could have taxed us far more than he did, and he chose not to.”

Kendrick half-bowed his head in appreciation, then his brow furrowed with concern.

“I’m afraid I arrive bearing grave news,” Kendrick said, clearing his throat. “Andronicus’ men follow not far behind us.”

“We laid our own eyes upon their forces,” Atme added.

There came a gasp among the men. Gwen felt a pit in her stomach.

“How long?” Brom asked.

“It could be a day. It could be more. It is a wall of devastation, and nothing will stop them.”

The others looked at each other, gravely.

“We saved these townsfolk,” Kendrick said, gesturing to the people who filed in through the gates, “but other towns will not be so fortunate. There isn’t time to save them all. We must prepare, if

there's any hope of defending this place."

"*Is* there any hope?" Gwen asked, watching his expression closely.

He looked at her gravely, and she saw the answer in his eyes. Her heart sank further.

"We must do the best we can do," he answered. "We are in the hands of the fates."

"Then there is less time than we thought," Kolk said.

"We must fortify the city at once," Srog said.

"Now that you're safely within our gates," Brom added, "we can begin to seal the outer walls."

"We were waiting for you," Gwen explained.

Kendrick looked back at her, and she could see that he was touched.

"Then I owe you a great debt," he replied.

"Sound the horns," Gwen commanded, taking charge. "We have no more time to waste." She turned to Srog. "Command your men to begin the fortifications."

Srog shouted up to a soldier, high up on the walls, and he turned and shouted to several others. Several took up horns and blew them, the sound echoing throughout Silesia. Soldiers began to filter from their barracks and head along the wall towards the outer fortifications.

"My lady," Srog said, turning to Gwendolyn. "You have seen but the upper city of Silesia. Our people down below, in lower Silesia, who live amidst the canyon walls, await your visit. In this time of trouble it would reassure them greatly to meet you. May I suggest that we all survey the city together?"

"I would be honored," Gwen said.

Gwen turned and accompanied Srog and the others as the men fell in behind them, the large and growing group walking through the streets of Silesia, heading towards the entrance to the lower city. As they walked, the soldiers all speaking to each other in an excited but agitated way, Gwen fell in besides Kendrick. It was natural walking beside him, as they had since they were children in King's Court, yet Gwen had something pressing on her mind which she needed to share.

"I feel guilty, being appointed ruler," she said softly, out of earshot of the others. "Yes, it was what father wanted. But you are his firstborn. And you are a man. And, with Erec gone, you are the de facto leader of the Silver. All the soldiers respect you. You've fought side by side with each of them. And me? What have I done? I feel as if I've done nothing to merit all this. All I have done is been our father's daughter. And not even his firstborn daughter."

Kendrick shook his head.

"You don't see your own virtues," he said. "You are far more than

that. Father was not a rash man. Or a foolish one. All of his decisions, he made wisely. And choosing you was the wisest of all. It is not strength or military prowess that makes a great ruler. A great *soldier*, maybe—but not a great ruler. It is not about one's ability to wield a sword, or even about the way other men look up to you. That might make a good ruler—but not a great one.

"A great ruler is forged of wisdom. Knowledge. Temperance. Compassion. Insight. And it is you who possess all of those qualities. *That* is what father saw in you. That is why he chose you. And I must agree with him. Do not underestimate yourself. And don't feel guilt. I am content with my lot. You deserve it, and I wish for nothing more than to serve you, whether you are my younger sister or not."

Gwen felt a rush of love for him, as she always had. He always knew exactly what to say, ever since they were small children.

"I appreciate your kindness, brother," she said. "But I still feel as if you've been passed over. And that doesn't sit right with me. If I am to rule, I want you to help me rule. I want you to have a position of import. I would like to name you as ruler of our armed forces. I want all of them—the Silver, the Legion, the King's Men—to answer to you. After all, there is no one I trust more, and no one better fitting. You are a MacGil, too, and it will inspire the men to have you in court."

"That is not something you need to do, my sister," he said softly, humbled. "I love you equally, no matter what."

"I know I don't need to," she said. "I *want* to."

Before he could say another word, she turned to Srog.

"Srog!" she called out.

"Yes my lady," he said, rushing up to her, Brom and Kolk beside him.

"I appoint my brother Kendrick in the new position of ruler of the armed forces," she said formally. "I would ask all the generals of all the forces assembled here to answer to him. Of course, you will lead your men, and Kolk and Brom, you will lead yours, but Kendrick will take direct control of the Silver, and you will all answer to him. I realize my brother is far younger in years than you are. But I also know it is what my father would have wanted, and I can think of no one more deserving."

"My lady, it is a wise choice, and admire your sharing of power. We will gladly answer to Kendrick who, after all, is our bravest and finest warrior."

"As will we," answered Kolk and Brom heartily.

"Then the matter is settled," Gwen said. "Kendrick, I salute you on your new position."

Kendrick looked down.

"I am deeply humbled," he said. "I will serve you with my life."

“As you always have,” Brom said, stepping forward and clasping him on the shoulder.

They wound their way through the shining, red cobblestone streets, the stone lighting up in the early morning light, and approached a deep and narrow arched alleyway, carved of stone, wide enough for only two people to pass through at a time. At the far end of it, maybe fifty yards away, the light of the Canyon shone through. Several soldiers stood guard, snapping to attention as they approached.

“The entranceway to lower Silesia, my lady,” Srog said.

Gwen entered with the others, all of them marching in the blackness of the tunnel, the only light that of the Canyon at the far end, their footsteps and whispers echoing off the walls. It was an eerie feeling, walking through this long tunnel; Gwen felt as if she were entering a portal to another world.

“We are the same people, up above and down below,” Srog explained, “yet in some ways, the upper and lower Silesias are like two different cities. Those above ground rarely descend, and those down below, clinging to the side of the Canyon, like to stay there. Those afraid of heights don’t do well down below; they jokingly refer to lower Silesians as mountain goats. Yet those who breathe the Canyon air are content where they are, and find no need to come to the ‘flatlands’, as they call it.”

Gwen smiled.

“Otherwise,” he continued, “we are very much one people. Make no mistake about it: if Andronicus should attack, we will all defend as one city. And if the upper city gets overrun, we can fall back on the lower city. That is the great strength of Silesia. That is why it has not been conquered in a thousand years.”

They all reached the edge of the tunnel, and Gwen stood on a small landing. A cold gust of wind hit her in the face, and she looked down at the steep drop below. She grew dizzy. It was as if she were standing on a landing at the edge of the sky, before her nothing but the vast expanse of Canyon. She felt as if she were inside the Canyon itself: one more step and she would go plunging to her death.

Beneath her, built into the Canyon walls, she saw lower Silesia for the first time. Also built of an ancient red stone, its architecture was breathtakingly beautiful, the lower city replete with spires and parapets and dwellings, all built right into the side of the cliff, jutting out from the Canyon a good fifty feet. There was activity below, people swarming about, livestock, children playing, all going about their ordinary lives as if they were living in a normal city, and not dangling on the edge of a cliff, with a plunge beneath them that would send them to their deaths with one wrong step.

Gwendolyn pulled back, feeling nauseated, wondering how these people could live this way.

"Don't worry, everyone reacts the same way the first time," Srog smiled. "It takes some getting used to. After a while, you don't even notice the heights."

Srog led the way down a narrow, twisting stone staircase embedded in the side of the cliff. Gwendolyn gripped the railing firmly, knuckles white, as they headed down the steps, trying not to peek over the edge as another gust of wind came, so strong it knocked her off balance. She was not necessarily afraid of heights, but this descent was so steep, and so close to the edge, it got to her. She could hardly fathom how people did it—especially how they could let their children play, so care free. She assumed they were all desensitized.

After several flights they reached a broad landing, fifty feet wide with a high railing, and Gwen finally relaxed again. Waiting to greet them as they came down were several dozen lower Silesians, pouring out from side alleyways, seeming to come out of the cliffs themselves. As with the Silesians above, they were a warm and friendly people, all wearing welcoming smiles, and all looking to Gwen with adoration. It was clear that, as with those above, they all looked to her as their leader.

Gwendolyn felt overwhelmed. It was a surreal feeling for her, having all these people looking to her for guidance, and again she felt unsure if she could live up to the task of being the leader they needed. Being a king's daughter had aged her more quickly than most, yet she was still just sixteen, barely an adult herself. She marveled at how these people put such faith in her. She knew deep down it was only because of her father. Clearly, they had loved him. For that, she loved them back. Anyone who had been loyal to her father earned her love and appreciation.

"My fellow Silesians," Srog boomed. "It is my honor to introduce our lady Gwendolyn, daughter of King MacGil, the new ruler of the Western Kingdom of the Ring."

There came a shout and cheer as the crowd rushed forward, several women clasping her shoulder, some of them giving her a hug, others kissing her hand. Others ran their palms on her cheek, and children stroked her long hair. They raised three fingers to their right temple, then slowly pulled them away, saluting her.

Gwen cleared her throat.

"I am here to serve you in any way I can," she said back to them, raising her voice to be heard over the howling of the wind. "I hope that the gods give me strength to serve you well."

"You already have, my lady!" yelled a woman from the crowd, and the others answered with a cheer.

Gwendolyn's brow furrowed with concern.

"It is only fair that you know what lies ahead of us," she continued. "As you know, the shield is down. As you may not know, Andronicus and his men have already invaded the Ring. It will not be long until they reach our city. We are vastly outnumbered. We will do our best to defend the city. But you must prepare yourselves for war, and for a siege."

"My lady, our great city has been attacked many times," called out another citizen. "We do not for death. Not even from Andronicus. If we go down, it will be as free men and women. We want nothing more!"

There arose another cheer from the crowd, then the Silesians began to dissipate, to head back to their fortifying the lower city, boarding windows and securing gates.

"Shall we?" Srog asked.

They continued their tour of the lower city, leading them through a series of twisting streets and alleyways, past impressive fortifications, all built into this startling city perched on the side of the Canyon.

Srog led them through an arched stone gate and down a long peninsula of rock jutting twenty feet into the Canyon.

"Canyon Point," Srog said.

They walked to the end, the wind even stronger here, cold gusts bringing tears to Gwen's eyes. She looked down and saw her feet enveloped in the mist that rolled in on the breeze. Then she looked up, out into the expanse. She felt dwarfed by the enormity of this spot in the world.

"You stand in the western-most point of the Ring," Srog said. "We use this platform as a lookout, when the mists are not too strong. From here, you can gain a commanding view of lower Silesia."

Srog turned back and faced the Canyon wall, and Gwen turned with him. She gasped, amazed at how impressive lower Silesia was. She saw thousands of people milling about their lives, stacked one story beneath the next, as if none knew what was going on above or below them. She could see why this place had lasted thousands of years. It was insurmountable.

"My lady," Srog said. "On behalf of my people, before the battle begins, we would like to know your position on surrender."

Gwen turned and saw the faces of all the men darken.

"I think we would all agree this is a once-in-a-lifetime situation," Srog said. "We have several thousand fine warriors prepared to fight to the death—but they will be up against a million men. Even the best warriors have their limits. We can hold them back, maybe. But for how long?"

“Perhaps long enough for Thor and the others to return with the Sword?” Gwen said.

The others looked at each other skeptically.

“Of course, my lady,” Brom said, “we all love Thor as a son. And we all have great faith in his courage. But even with as much respect as we have for them, we all know the odds of their return are next to impossible. And being practical warriors, we must make contingency plans.”

“My lady, we will stand by whatever you choose,” Srog said, “but we do need to know. Do you at any point plan on surrendering the city to Andronicus?”

“That would be naive,” Kendrick interjected. “We all know Andronicus’ reputation. He kills everyone. A surrender would be to offer ourselves up to slaughter. Or best case, to be his slaves. And he is merciless.”

“Then again,” Kolk said, “if we allow him to control this city and the Western Kingdom, he might make a deal. And if we don’t surrender, we might end up dead, or slaves, anyway.”

As Gwen listened to all the arguments, she felt overwhelmed with the weight of the decision before her. She did not want to make the wrong one. Yet it seemed that, no matter what she did, she could do no right. Either way, people could die.

“Srog,” she said, turning to him, “this may be my father’s court, but Silesia is *your* city. These are your people. You have lived with them, and fought with them, your entire life. I want to know what you think first. What they think. How do Silesians feel about surrender?”

Srog looked down, grave, and rubbed his beard.

“Silesians are a very warm and friendly people. But they’re also a very proud people. We have never surrendered, not once in the history of the Ring. They don’t know what surrender means.”

He sighed.

“They would follow you, my lady, whatever you choose. But they would not want you to surrender on their account. They value life. But they value honor more.”

“And Kendrick,” she said, turning to him. “What do you think?”

Kendrick furrowed his brow, looking out at the Canyon.

“A difficult decision,” he said. “On the one hand, it is prized to be fearless. Yet one does not want to be the uncompromising ruler who sends all his people to their deaths out of pride. Remember what I said: to be a ruler is different than being a soldier.”

“What would father have done?” Gwen asked.

Kendrick slowly shook his head.

“Father was a stubborn, proud man. He was more warrior than king. The decision you face is not a decision for a warrior. It is a

decision for a King. What matters now is what *you* would do."

Gwendolyn felt the weight of his words. She turned from the others, took several steps out, to the very tip of the landing, and looked out at the Canyon.

Gwen stood there, thinking. Kendrick's words rang in her head. They were true. After a certain point she had to stop worrying and thinking of what others thought, what others would decide. She had to stop feeling as if she weren't qualified enough to make a decision. She thought back to all of her years of study, in the House of Scholars. She thought of all the wars she had studied, all the sieges she had been quizzed on. She pondered the Annals of the MacGils, the history of the Ring. She recalled all the histories of surrender, of protracted sieges. She remembered reading of a few surrenders that had gone smoothly; but she remembered many more that had gone poorly. And none of the invaders were as ruthless as Andronicus.

Gwendolyn also recalled all the rulers she had read about, and the ones who had succeeded and the ones who did not. She felt that being a good ruler was not always about making the most logical decision, but sometimes about making the decision that held the most nobility, the most honor, for the people. She stood there and closed her eyes, willing for her father to help her make the right choice.

As she did, she felt a sudden strength and clarity overcome her. She felt she was not alone: there was the blood of six MacGil kings coursing through her. She was a MacGil, just like all the others. Just because she was a woman, it did not make her any lesser.

She turned and faced the others, her eyes aglow with a fierce determination.

"We may all die here together," she said, her voice booming with confidence. "But we will not surrender. We will never surrender. That is who we are. And who we are is more important than how we die."

The men all looked back at her, eyes widening with a new respect, even a look of awe. They all nodded gravely, and she could see they agreed. She could also see in their eyes that they had, finally, found their true leader.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Thor and the other Legion members marched, as they had for hours, on the narrow path that led from the jungle and took them into a desert clime, Krohn at their side as they followed the boy. Thor had been surprised to see the shocking change of terrain, from a wall of jungle, to an arid wasteland, nothing but open sky before them, dominated by the beating sun. They had left before first light at the behest of the boy's grandpa, who did not want them to be spotted by the Empire. The boy had been gracious enough to accompany them all this way, despite his grandpa's telling him not to. He had insisted on seeing them all off, on putting them all on the right trail.

Finally, after hours of marching, they reached a fork in the road, splitting in three directions.

"You see, this is why I had to come," said the boy, as they all stood there, breathing hard. "This is the fourth time the road has forked. Each time gets more confusing. I didn't want you to end up on the wrong road. If you had, you'd be dead by now. There are monsters in this desert plain you cannot imagine."

The boy sighed.

"But now that we've reached the final fork, I can turn back around and you can be on your way. Just take the far right path here, and it will bring you to Slave City. I wish you luck."

They all crowded around the boy with gratitude, and Thor reached out and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"We owe you a great debt for the kindness you have shown us," Thor said. "You saved our lives yesterday, total strangers, by bringing us to your grandfather's cottage. And now, once again, by leading us to the right road. How can we repay you for your service?"

The boy shrugged humbly.

"You needn't repay me," he said. "I like having the company. It gets lonely out here. Besides, I hate the Empire, and I'd like to see you defeat them and free us from this existence. I hate living in hiding. I want to be free."

"We will strive to do all that and more," Thor said, "yet surely there must be something we can do for you? Anything?"

The boy looked down to the ground.

"Well, there is one thing," he said, hesitant. "I have always dreamed of joining the Legion. I know I am too young now. And too small. But if you survive all this, if the Ring survives, maybe one day, I can find you and you can let me try out for it. That is all I ask. I know I'm small, but I can throw a spear better than anyone I know."

Thor smiled down at the boy.

“You have a big heart,” he said. “And it wasn’t long ago that I was your size—and despite that, I joined the Legion. I don’t see why you can’t, too. Right guys?” Thor asked, turning to the others.

They all nodded back enthusiastically.

“He has more heart than half the Legion,” Reece said.

“We will make sure they take you seriously,” O’Connor said. “It is the least we can do.”

The boy grinned wide.

“Tell me boy,” Thor said, “what is your name? You never told us.”

The boy looked up and squinted.

“I don’t have one,” he responded. “It is not our custom to give names here in the Empire. We are all slaves to the great Andronicus. Giving someone a name is punishable by death. Some of us take names upon ourselves. Hidden names, which we keep inside. But we are to never tell anyone.”

“You can tell us yours,” Thor said. “We vow to keep it a secret.”

The boy looked at all their faces, hesitating, and Thor could see the fear in his eyes. Finally, he cleared his throat and said:

“Ario.”

The boy quickly reached out, clasped forearms with Thor, then turned and hurried off, bouncing back down the road towards the jungle.

“Remember,” the boy called out, “do not stray from the path. The city comes upon you quickly. Be careful.”

With that, the boy turned and ran, disappearing down the road.

Thor turned and looked at the others, and they all followed the path closely.

Hour followed hour, and the second sun rose and grew unbearably hot as they marched deeper and deeper into the wasteland. As he marched, left alone with the monotony of his thoughts, Thor wondered when all of this would end. He saw before him the footsteps of those who must have stolen the Sword, their prints deep. The boy had been tracking their steps the entire way, and Thor was beginning to feel confident that they were close on their trail. He hoped that they could reach the city in time, catch the thieves before their arrival, and somehow get the Sword and get home, undetected by the Empire, before it was too late.

As they continued to march, Thor’s legs shaking, growing weary, finally they turned a bend, the land sloped off down below, and they were afforded a bird’s-eye view of Slave City. There it sat, sprawling on the horizon. It was the largest city Thor had ever seen, low and flat, stretching for miles with no end in sight. It had a drab, industrial feeling, with thousands of structures built close to each other.

Amidst these structures worked thousands of slaves, packed into the streets, milling about like ants. Even from here, Thor could see that they were chained to each other, and that among them were thousands of Empire taskmasters, whipping them. Punctuating the city were large flashes of light, and Thor saw small fires shoot up from the ground, all over the place. The city blended into the desert land, and Thor was surprised to see it was not enclosed.

"No gates, no walls," Thor observed.

"I guess they're not afraid the slaves will run," Reece said.

"Where would they run to, in this godforsaken place?" Elden asked.

"They don't need them," Conval said. "They're all chained together. They couldn't run if they tried."

"Not to mention the soldiers," Conven said. "There are as many of them as there are slaves."

"Plus, they don't need walls to defend it," O'Connor said, "because nobody would be stupid enough to attack. There are thousands of Empire here. And nothing around this place for miles."

"Why would the thieves bring the Sword to this place?" Elden asked.

Thor studied the ground, and saw the tracks heading in that direction.

"It doesn't make sense," Reece added.

Thor shrugged.

"Like the boy said, maybe it's a stop for them, on the road to somewhere else."

As one, they all set off on the trail towards the city, each of them tensing up, hands on their scabbards.

"It won't be long until we're spotted," Reece said. "You see that crop of rock there? We should head to it and stay close along its edge, in the shadows. Otherwise they'll see us."

"But the boy said not to go off the path," O'Connor said.

Reece shrugged.

"We won't be *far* off the path. And I'd rather take my chances with whatever's out there than with the Empire."

Thor could feel them all looking to him to make the final decision. He could see both points of view, and it was not an easy call.

Finally, he nodded back.

"The path is a guaranteed death," Thor said. "The rock is not. Let's go to the rock."

As one, they all hurried off the path, sticking close to the huge outcropping of rock so as not to be detected. They slowly approached the city. Hardly a hundred yards away, they could begin to hear the cries and moans of the slaves, suffering beneath the abuse of the

Empire soldiers. The city was filled with the sound of cracking whips, and of bursting flames, shooting up everywhere.

As they neared, Thor saw metal structures built into the ground from which dangled some sort of mining apparatus; the slaves, held by thick iron shackles, guided them to massive holes, striking again and again into the ground. As they dug deeper into the holes, flames shot up and into the structure.

"What are they doing?" Conval asked.

"It looks like they're mining something," Elden said.

"But what?"

They all shrugged, at a loss.

Before they could take another step, suddenly O'Connor screamed out—and they all stopped and turned. Thor looked down and saw the long, bony hand of a beast shoot up from the sand and grab O'Connor's calf. It wrapped its claws around him and yanked O'Connor, dragging him down, sinking into the sand.

Thor was first to react, stepping forward with his sword and slashing the creature's wrist. There came a muted screeching noise, from somewhere beneath the sand, and the creature's arm slunk back down to the ground. But the hand, severed, still clung to O'Connor's calf, screaming; Krohn, snarling, leapt forward and bit it, and the hand let go and scurried across the sand, then dove down beneath the surface, too.

The boys looked at each other in wonder.

But they had no time to figure it out, because suddenly, dozens of creatures' arms started popping out from the sand, all around them. Thor finally understood why the boy told them not to veer from the path.

Thor jumped out of the way as a hand shot out for his leg—he leapt over it and crushed it with his boot. But then another surfaced and scratched his ankle.

"Run!" Thor said. "Back to the path!"

As one they all ran, slashing down with their swords, trying their best to avoid the claws. Thor's legs stung in pain as he was clawed and scratched incessantly. Krohn snarled and jumped as he ran, snapping at the hands that emerged from the sand.

They sprinted for their lives, leaping more than running, and finally they made it back onto the path, just steps outside the city.

They all kept running, trying to enter the city quickly enough so as not to be seen. Thor led them into the city and down a narrow alleyway between two buildings where there seemed to be few Empire soldiers, and which was thronged with slaves.

The slaves stopped their work, the sound of their chisels slowing, and turned and looked at them in wonder. Their eyes were wide open:

clearly they had never seen free people in these streets before.

"Who are you?" asked one of them.

Thor turned and saw a large man, face covered in dirt, leaning back on his pick, surveying the group. Dozens of other slaves gathered.

"We've come from the Ring," Thor said. "We are on a quest, to find something that was stolen from us. We seek a dozen men, carrying a sword. We were told they came to this city. Have you seen them?"

The large slave shook his head.

"You have made a grave mistake to come here," he said in his low voice, as more and more people gathered. "You will not leave alive. No one leaves alive. The Empire troops are everywhere. There is no escape."

"Free us!" cried another slave.

"Yes, free us!" cried another, holding up his chains, desperate. "Or we will alert the guards to your presence!"

Thor drew his sword, as did the others.

"You will do no such thing," Reece warned.

"We will free you if you tell us where the men went with the Sword," Thor said.

"We have no fear of you," said the large slave, stepping forward, scowling down at them. "Do you know what it is that we mine here? Fire!"

"Fire?" Thor asked, puzzled.

The slave turned with his pick, and struck the ground again and again. After several seconds, a burst of flame shot into the air, and the large metal structure glowed orange, absorbing the flames.

"These are the fire mines," another slave said, stepping forward defiantly. "One of the worst places you can be sent in the Empire. There is nothing you or your swords can do to us which they have not done already. So now free us. This is your last chance. If you do not, we will summon the guards!"

Thor stood there, wavering.

"Don't do it," Elden said.

"If you free them," Reece said, "they will start a commotion, and it will give us away."

"Free us!" screamed the group of slaves, louder and louder.

Thor and the others looked nervously about, and in the distance he saw several guards turn their way.

"GUARDS!" screamed a slave.

"GUARDS!" the others echoed.

"Run!" Thor said, not wanting a confrontation. "This way!"

They all ran down an alleyway, twisting and turning their way

deeper into Slave City, past rows of slaves, all of whom stopped and looked as they went. Thor checked back over his shoulder, and his stomach dropped at what he saw: dozens of Empire troops bore down on them.

A horn sounded, and dozens more troops joined them, pouring in from all directions.

They were quickly surrounded, soldiers charging them from all directions, and there was nowhere to go.

"Over here!" came a voice.

Thor turned and saw a single slave girl, chained to a post, gesturing wildly towards them. With long, wild black hair, and a pretty face covered in dirt, she had desperate, flashing black eyes. She lifted a huge metal trap door into the earth, and gestured for them to run towards her.

"Inside, quickly!" she yelled. "I will hide you!"

Thor looked at the others, who were skeptical; but then they turned and saw all the troops bearing down on them, and realized they didn't have much choice. He didn't want to enter into a battle with thousands of Empire troops, and certainly not here, in these close quarters, and in a place he did not know. He would have to trust her.

Thor nodded and the others all turned and raced with him for the open compartment, diving in head-first, Krohn diving in beside him. Thor dove into the shallow hole in the earth, the others diving on top of him, all sandwiched in like sardines, and the girl slammed the lid down on top of them—making their world blackness.

Krohn nestled up against Thor, and it was hard to breathe in here. Thor's heart pounded and he could not help but wonder if they were being set up, if it was all a trap. He wondered if maybe it had been stupid to dive down here, to trust her.

The sounds above them became muffled, and Thor heard the girl stand on the metal lid, and then heard the footsteps of dozens of soldiers running past. After several seconds, the ground above became quiet, and the girl lifted the compartment.

The metal door opened slowly, harsh light pouring in, and Thor saw the girl's face, gesturing quickly for them to get up. They all scrambled out and she led them to the shadows of a wall, standing beside them, her wrists shackled in heavy iron chains.

"Free me," she said, her eyes wild, desperate. "Cut my shackles!"

Thor examined her: she was tall and broad and bony, nearly as tall as Elden, with plain features, and large black eyes. She was covered in dirt, and had a wild, crazed look to her, and a toughness that Thor rarely saw in a girl. She also had a bit of a shady, wily look, and Thor didn't feel as if they could entirely trust her. She was clearly a survivor.

“And why should we?” Elden asked firmly, stepping close to her.

She looked up at Elden, examining him, and he looked closely at her, too.

“Because I will lead you out of here!” she said. “No one else knows this city as I. If you don’t follow me, you will certainly be caught and enslaved by these guards. But I know a way out. There isn’t much time. Do you want to trust me?”

Thor shook his head.

“We appreciate your offer, but we didn’t come to this city to run away,” he said. “We came to find a sword, and the group of men bearing it.”

“I know where they went,” she said.

They all looked at her, wide-eyed.

“And how would you know that?” Conval asked.

“Because they are thieves,” she said. “And so am I. Thieves always know where each other go.”

The boys all looked at each other, surprised by her candor.

“I can lead you on their trail,” she added. “It leads out of the city. They are not here.”

Elden narrowed his eyes, distrustful.

“Why don’t you just tell us how to go and we’ll be on our way,” Elden said.

Thor could see something he hadn’t seen before in Elden’s expression; he seemed more than merely curious. He seemed interested in this girl.

She shook her head.

“That’s not the deal,” she said. “Either I go with you, or not at all.”

“Why do you want to come with us?” he asked.

“I want to leave here, too,” she said, “and this is my chance.”

“And how can we trust you—a thief?” Reece chimed in.

“You can’t,” she answered. “But you have to trust someone. Free me now!” she demanded, looking both ways down the alley as a guard ran past, “or else, I will be content to just watch you die here!”

Elden looked at her long and hard.

“I say we free her,” Elden said.

“And trust our lives in the hands of this slave girl?” O’Connor called out. “This thief? She could be leading us to a trap.”

“She might have no idea where the Sword is,” Conval added.

“What choice do we have?” Reece asked.

They all looked to Thor.

Thor cleared his throat.

“The way I see it,” Thor said, “she saved our lives once already. She didn’t have to. We need to find the Sword, and she says she knows

where it is. That's better than what we have now, which is nothing. Thief or not, slave or not, I say we trust her."

Thor stepped forward, close to her, and raised his sword.

"If you lead us to safety, and on the trail of the thieves," Thor said, "I promise to protect you. If you betray us, I promise I will kill you."

"I don't need your protection," she sneered, defiant. "Now stop talking and get me out of here!"

Elden stepped forward, raised his sword and brought it down in a single clean stroke. With a decisive clink, he severed her chain.

"Follow me!" she said, not wasting a beat as she took off at a sprint, twisting and turning down the narrow alleyways of the city.

Thor and the others did not wait a second longer; they took off after her as she twisted and turned, darting down the alleyways, leading them deeper and deeper into Slave City. Groups of slaves, chained to each other, turned and reached out and yelled at them as they went, trying to grab them, to stop them. But they ran too quickly.

The girl was incredible, like a living map. She clearly knew every inch of the city, and she took sharp turns through narrow alleyways that Thor could hardly imagine. The six of them stayed close, Krohn by Thor's side, as they weaved their way out of the city, heading clear through to the other end. It was hot and dusty as they ran, and the streets, filled with the sounds of whips and cries and machinery, began to become filled with something else: the sounds of slaves rising up, looking their way, and calling out.

Suddenly, an Empire taskmaster stepped forward with a whip and lashed the girl hard across her back.

She cried out in pain and stumbled, falling flat on her face.

"Get back to work, slave girl!" the taskmaster yelled.

Elden, red with rage, didn't even slow as he continued to sprint, raised his sword and swung it for the taskmaster. The taskmaster turned and caught a glimpse of Elden, and his eyes opened wide with fear; but there was no time for him to react.

Elden chopped off the man's head and continued running without even slowing. He then reached down, picked up the girl by the arm and dragged her up, helping her back on her feet, to run with them.

Thor turned and saw dozens more troops gathering, chasing them. He looked forward, saw the city limits before them, and saw a wide open expanse, an open field that would leave them vulnerable once they exited—especially with the large contingent following them.

Thor ran up beside the girl, trying to catch his breath.

"You are leading us out of the city and into the open fields!" Thor yelled. "We will be exposed! How shall we outrun them in the open?"

"Those fields are not open," she said, gasping for air. "Trust me."

They all ran as one, bursting out into the open fields; Thor did not understand what she meant, but he knew they had no choice: they had to trust her.

They followed her out into the open field, Thor wondering what trick she had up her sleeve, as suddenly a huge flame burst out of the ground, right beside Thor, and singed his sleeve. He jumped back, barely avoiding it, and continued to run.

"What was that?" he screamed.

"The fire fields!" she yelled back. "Look behind you. Do you see the Empire troops?"

Thor turned as he ran and saw the dozens of Empire troops had stopped, standing at the edge of the city, wavering, unsure whether to follow.

"They are not crazy enough to pursue us out here!" she yelled.

Before she could finish her sentence, another huge flame shot up into the air, near O'Connor, who screamed out as the flame burned his forearm. He reached over and swatted it, putting it out.

"Where have you taken us?" he screamed to her.

"It is our only hope to freedom!" she screamed back. "And it is the path the thieves took!"

Thor checked over his shoulder again, and saw a handful of troops break off from the group and decide to chase after them. As he watched, one of them ran right into a huge ball of flames—screaming, he collapsed to the ground, dead.

Flames shot up around them with greater frequency as they went, and Thor weaved left and right, hoping and praying they could survive this minefield of flames. All around him his brothers did the same, as did Krohn, who was whining and snarling as they went, snapping at the balls of fire. A flame singed his leg and he whined and jumped, but kept running.

"When does this end?" Thor yelled to the girl.

Thor heard a scream and watched another Empire soldier get burned to death, shrieking.

"There!" the girl screamed, pointing. "See there, in the distance?"

Thor looked, and began to see a raging river come into view, up ahead.

"That is our way out!" she screamed. "If we make it!"

"Our way out?" Thor asked, in disbelief.

This plan was crazier than he thought: the river's waters were foaming and raging, and he could not see how its waters would be much safer than this minefield.

Still, they had no choice. The girl increased her speed and so did they. Thor prayed to God with all his might that a ball of flame not consume him before he could reach the waters. He tried to run as fast

and as light as he could.

Thor's face was black with soot as they closed in on the river, hardly ten feet away, the sound of its gushing waters deafening—when suddenly a ball of flame rose up before him. He didn't have time to slow.

Thor raised his arms to his face as his whole body was consumed in the fire. He screamed as he began to catch fire, sprinting with all he had and leaping, in flames, into the raging current.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lord Kultin marched with purpose down the stone corridors of King's Court, his dozens of soldiers behind him, looking forward to betraying Gareth, slicing his throat, and seizing his throne for himself.

Kultin had been biding his time for way too long, putting up with Gareth's nonsense only because the pay was good and the Shield was up and for a while it seemed as if Gareth would rule forever. But once Andronicus breeched the Ring, Kultin knew Gareth's days were numbered, and he knew the time had come. At first Kultin was just going to abandon Gareth; but then, when he saw what a weak and pathetic king he was, it sickened him. He knew that he, himself, could be a better king, and that that was exactly what King's Court needed now. Not Gareth, not his sister and not any more MacGils—but rather he, Lord Kultin, a *real* man, a mercenary who could take the throne by *force*. For centuries, that was how kings were made, and Kultin felt it was time to reinstate the old way. After all, who better merited being a king than he who had seized the throne not by entitlement but by power?

Kultin quickened his pace, looking forward to Gareth's expression when he marched into the little weasel's chamber and defied his command, when he threw him from his throne and killed him on the spot. He might allow Gareth to beg for a little while. But no matter what he said, in the end, he would do what everyone in King's Court wanted: he would kill the king.

Kultin breathed deep, already savoring the rush of power he would feel. He would be king. He. King. And then he would turn things around for King's Court. He would rally all the soldiers, who would be thrilled to have a real soldier leading them, and he would bar the gates of King's Court and put up a real defense against Andronicus. He would oust him from the Ring and then he, Kultin, would be supreme ruler of all the Ring.

Kultin slammed open the high, arched doors leading into the King's private chamber, expecting to find him sitting there, on his throne, as he always did—excited to see Gareth's look of surprise and horror.

But as he entered the chamber, he knew right away that something was wrong. It couldn't be.

It was empty.

It was impossible. Kultin had sealed off all exits to prevent Gareth's escape. He couldn't have just vanished. And he didn't understand how Gareth had known he was coming.

Kultin scoured the room thoroughly, and then, he saw it: the

fireplace. Inside its opening was a trap door, ajar.

Kultin leaned back, reddening. Gareth had escaped. He had found a back way out of the castle. He had known he was coming. He had outsmarted him.

Kultin screamed in frustration, knowing Gareth would already be far away, out of his grasp. As he turned to the window, he began to feel his dreams being dashed.

But as he looked out through the open-air window, he caught sight of something that gave him far greater worries. He did a double-take, unbelieving at first. But as he looked carefully, his heart dropped to see that it was true. For the first time in his life, he knew what it meant to feel fear. Real fear.

Down below there came a great shout, as Andronicus' army suddenly burst through the gates of King's Court, slaughtering everyone in sight. In they poured, thousands of them, like a dam breaking, one massive wave of destruction.

Behind them, filling the horizon, were a million men, covering the ground like ants.

Before Kultin could even process what was happening, before he could even turn to command his men, or reach for his sword, suddenly a lone soldier looked up, set his sights on him through the window, and let his spear fly.

It sailed through the air and pierced Lord Kultin's throat, entering one end and exiting the other.

Kultin stood there, wide-eyed, grasping his throat as blood poured through his hands. And he keeled over and fell out the window.

He tumbled, end over end, heading for the ground, and in his final thoughts, he wondered, of all things, how Gareth got away.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Erec charged through the gates of Savaria, Alistair clinging to him on the back of Warkfin, the Duke, Brandt and several knights charging by his side. They had not stopped riding since encountering those monsters on the battlefield, and as Erec glanced back over his shoulder he saw they were still in pursuit, even on foot nearly as fast as their horses.

"SOUND THE HORNS!" the Duke screamed. "SHUT THE GATES!"

As soon as they passed through, the iron spikes slammed down behind them, hitting the earth with a great reverberating thud.

As they entered the city a panic ensued, as one horn after another sounded and citizens ran through the streets, hurrying to their homes, barring the doors and shutters. Troops poured out of everywhere, taking up positions along the walls, up on parapets, behind the main city gates. The Duke barked orders at all of them.

Erec rode with Alistair across the plaza to the Duke's castle, stopping only long enough to help her dismount. He looked down at her earnestly, holding her hand.

"You saved my life," he said. "Now I will save yours. I implore you: stay within these castle doors until this conflict is over. If we do not win, the Duke's attendants will show you a secret tunnel for your escape. Please, heed me. These creatures are savage."

With that Erec turned and kicked his horse and galloped back across the plaza, joining his friend Brandt as they went to help the Duke's forces before the city gate.

They all sat on their horses, in a row, dozens of soldiers, waiting, facing the iron spikes, and behind these, the ancient closed oak doors. Erec looked up and saw hundreds of soldiers taking positions on parapets all about the city. But hundreds of those creatures were charging for the city even now, and he knew it would be a tough defense.

"How long do you think the gates will hold?" Brandt asked.

Erec shrugged, studying the ancient wood. If it were a normal human adversary, he could easily say. Both with these creatures, one never knew.

"Those gates have stood the test of time," the Duke said proudly.

Before he could finish the words, they were all shocked to hear a rumble, like elephants charging, then a splitting crack: Erec could not believe it as he watched, before his eyes, the huge oak gates, five feet thick, thirty feet high, get torn off of their hinges, leaving between them and the creatures only the spiked iron gate.

The creatures lifted the wooden doors as if they were playthings

and hurled them down to the ground. Then they set their sights on the iron bars.

Hundreds of them converged on the metal, pushing their snarling, hideous faces against it, poking through the bars, which were already starting to bend.

"You were saying?" Brandt asked the Duke, red-faced, mouth open in shock.

"ARCHERS!" screamed the Duke.

Erec did not wait for a command. He had already fired off three arrows by the time the Duke called out, and had shot three of the creatures square in the head as they grabbed the gates. They all fell.

All around Erec, dozens of the Duke's men fired. The front row of creatures went down, but there quickly appeared dozens more behind them. There seemed to be an army of these things let loose from the other side of the Canyon, just waiting all these years to wreak havoc on the Ring, as soon as the Shield was down.

The metal of the gates began to bend further, and Erec realized that their arrows wouldn't hold them back for long.

"TAR!" screamed the Duke.

High above, on the parapets, dozens of soldiers slowly turned over steaming cauldrons of tar.

As they poured down all around the city walls, the screams of the creatures arose, doused in the burning liquid. It killed dozens on the spot. Bodies of the creatures piled up before the gate.

Yet Erec saw behind them hundreds more, still charging. He knew it would only be a matter of time until those gates gave way, until they ran out of arrows and tar to hold them back. He knew they needed a strategy, and quickly, before the gates came crashing down.

"Is there a back way out of the city?" Erec asked.

The Duke looked at him, puzzled.

"If I can sneak up behind them, I can flank them," Erec said. "Create another front and draw their attention from the gates. It's the only way. We need to split their army. If they attack those gates as one force, they will soon tear it down."

The Duke nodded, understanding.

"You are a brave soul," he said. "Cross the plaza and take the third gate on the right. You'll find, just past it, a small arched door with no handle, hidden by stone. That is the one. May the gods be with you."

Erec turned and galloped across the city, following the directions. He heard a horse galloping behind him and turned and to see Brandt, smiling as he charged up beside him.

"Think I'd let you have all the fun?" Brandt asked.

Erec had been prepared to take on the army alone, but was happy

to see his old friend by his side.

They ducked under a stone arch, then followed the Duke's directions until they found the hidden door. Concealed with a stone facade, the door was hard to find; as they dismounted, Erec leaned back and kicked it several times, until it finally gave way. He remounted and ducked as he rode through it, Brandt following, and slamming the door securely behind them.

After passing through a long tunnel, the two of them exited out the back of the city walls; they waited until they were a safe distance, then rode around the perimeter of the city in a broad circle, to ambush the creatures from behind.

They finally circled all the way around and rode towards the rear of the creatures. They charged, coming upon them as they were converging at the gate. The iron was buckling, and they arrived just in time.

Erec raised his sword and let out a fierce battle cry, wanting to draw their attention from the gate, and Brandt joined in.

It worked. Half of the army of creatures turned and charged for them. The Covenies were hideous beings, so tall they were almost at face-level with them, even on horseback; their bodies were rippling with muscles, their skin a glowing yellow, fingers tapering in long, yellow claws, each with two heads and arms eight feet long. They did not carry weapons: they did not need to.

They shrieked, and their battle cries were even louder than Erec's.

But Erec was unafraid. He had trained all his life for days like this; he knew his cause was true and noble, and he felt more alive than ever.

Erec raised his sword high, and as the first beast leapt into the air, raising his claws to gouge out Erec's eyes, Erec ducked, swung hard, and cut his torso in half.

Erec continued to charge, stabbing another creature through the heart. With his other hand he raised a long, spiked flail, spun it high overhead, and took off three of their heads at once.

But Erec felt a searing pain in his side as a creature leapt into the air and tackled him from the side, knocking him off his horse and to the ground. The creature raised his hands high, preparing to bring down his claws for Erec's face—but Warkfin neighed, leaned back, and kicked the creature hard in his chest, crushing his ribs and sending him flying backwards, dead.

Erec rolled out of the way as another creature brought his fist down for his head, just missing; he jumped and regained his feet, grabbed his sword and slashed, killing it.

But these creatures were too fast, and there were too many of them. Erec felt himself kicked hard from behind, and went flying face

first to the ground.

Erec spun to see the creature extend his claws and prepare to bring them down and slash his throat. He could not react in time. He braced himself, preparing to die.

As he braced himself, a lance pierced the creature's chest. Brandt appeared, stabbing the creature in mid-air before he could harm Erec.

Erec regained his feet, as always grateful for his friend; he spotted a creature leaping for Brandt, and Erec grabbed his flail, swung it, and brought the spiked ball down on the creature's head, right before he tackled Brandt.

Another creature dove and knocked Brandt from his horse, falling to the ground close to Erec. Erec spun and stabbed the creature in the throat.

Now Brandt and Erec stood back to back, swords drawn, parrying and defending the great blows of these beasts, who circled them. The group of beasts was growing thicker by the moment, and the two of them were badly outnumbered. Erec's arms were growing tired, and a creature pounced from behind and snatched his flail from his hands.

Before Erec could turn, another creature kicked him in the back of the shoulder blade, knocking his sword from his hands. A third creature kicked him hard behind his knee, sending him down.

Erec lay on the ground and looked up to see his friend Brandt get kicked in the chest and go down, too, beside him, unconscious.

He looked up and saw he was surrounded. Lying there, alone, defenseless, there was nothing left for him to do but to watch helplessly, as they all, as one, prepared to finish him off.

Finally, Erec knew, his time of death had come.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Selese paced her cottage, mindlessly fingering an assortment of herbs, looking out the window at her small village, and thinking only of Reece. Ever since he had left her town, she had been able to think of nothing else. His name rung in her head like a mantra. Reece.

Reece.

The King's son. The one she had spurned. The one she had saved. She had been so foolish to be so cold to him, to send him away like that.

Not because he was a King's son.

But because, despite what she'd told him, she had loved him too.

Caught off guard by his advances, by her feelings for him, Selese had put on a good show, had acted as if she had thought he was crazy, irrational, to profess his love for her so quickly. But deep down, she had loved him back—possibly even more than he had loved her. There was something about his personality, his passion, his honesty, that had drawn her in like a magnet. She had just been unable to express it. Afraid to admit it. Afraid he would think she was crazy.

She had been so stupid, so defensive, so juvenile. She hadn't had the courage to have been as honest as he was. Because she had also been afraid. Afraid to believe it was true—and afraid that it could go away as quickly as it had come.

Now that he was gone, and had been gone for days, Selese felt the persistent feeling in her heart that hung over her like a cloud, and she knew that it was real. She knew from the ache in her stomach, the pain in her chest, the fact that she could not stop thinking about him, not stop seeing his face, hearing his voice, every waking minute. She knew that her love for him was more real than ever anything she'd ever felt in her life.

Selese had been up for two nights, tormenting herself about how she could have done things differently. And how she could make things right.

She stood there, looking out the window, fiddling with the herbs, choosing which she would take and which she would leave. Beside her, her sack was packed with her belongings. She was ready to leave this place and never come back. She was determined to seek out Reece and begin a life with him.

Whatever it took, she would find him. She would give him another chance—and ask for another chance herself. Maybe, just maybe, she hoped and prayed, he would say yes. Not because she wanted out of her village; she loved her village. Not because he was a King's son; she could care less if he was a pauper. But because of that

something in his eyes, in his voice, that something between them. Because of how much he loved her. Because of the way he spoke to her.

As she stood there, watching the dawn break, she mentally prepared herself to say goodbye to this place. She closed her eyes and said a prayer to every god she knew, praying that she would find him, and that he would not send her away. Eyes closed, she memorized the way her cottage looked, the way her potions were spread out, her herbs hung. She hoped that one day she could live together with Reece somewhere in a place like this.

That was when she heard the noise. It was an unusual noise, one she hadn't heard in years, and at first she thought her ears were deceiving her. But she listened more closely, and knew that it was real. It was the sound of insects, scattering their way across the baked desert floor. Thousands of insects; millions of them. It was a noise of frenzy. The very vibration of it ran through her body.

A nation of insects didn't run, Selese knew, unless something was wrong. Very, very wrong.

She turned and bolted from her cottage, stood outside and watched the desert. Sure enough, she spotted them: a line of insects, racing away, as if running from a disaster.

Or from an army.

Selese, heart pounding, slowly turned, afraid to see what she would discover. She looked back in the other direction, the direction the insects were running from, and her throat went dry: the horizon was black with men. It appeared to be the entire planet, marching right towards her village, an enormous force of destruction. The insects were wise; they knew when it was time to run.

Her village, still asleep, lay right in their path. And Selese was the only one awake.

Selese sprinted across the town square, charged up the steps, and rang the town bell, again and again, yanking the coarse rope with all her might. Slowly, the town woke, people coming from out of their homes, half awake, looking up at her as if she were mad.

She pointed at the horizon.

"An army!" she screamed.

The townsfolk finally turned and looked out, and their horrified expressions showed that they, too, saw what approached. Terrified shouts rose up, and more and more of them filtered out of their homes. A state of panic flooded the town, as they all began to flee from the village.

Selese's heart pounded as she saw the army bear down on them, picking up speed. Her first instinct was to turn and flee with the others. But she forced herself to first run, cottage to cottage, all

throughout the village, and make sure everyone was awake, accounted for. She woke up several families, helped children gather their possessions and saved more lives than she could count.

Finally, when everyone else was taken care of, she prepared to flee herself. She started to head back to her own cottage to gather her sack—but then she realized there wasn't time. She would have to leave her things behind if she wanted to survive.

Selese turned and fled out the village gates with the others, joining the mass exodus. They charged across the empty desert, under a burnt-orange sky, heading somewhere north. Somewhere towards Silesia.

And somewhere, she prayed, towards Reece.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Godfrey sat hunched over a bar, in a seedy pub in a forgotten corner of Silesia, flanked by Akorth and Fulton, as he took a deep drink and admired the strong ale of this city. He emptied it, setting down his fourth mug of foaming red ale, and it went right to his head. He was feeling overwhelmed by the colors of this place: everything in this city was red, from the bartender's red outfit, to the tables and chairs—even his ale. It was starting to make him dizzy. Either that, or the beer.

But that was hardly foremost in Godfrey's mind: as he buried his head over the bar with his compatriots, he tried to forget his woes, to forget the imminent war. Most of all, Godfrey hated himself. He knew he should be out there, supporting his sister, his brother, out with the others, trying his best to help defend the city. But he just couldn't bring himself to. That was the way he had always been, since his youth: when hard times came, he was unable to face them. Instead, he would retreat to the bar and drown his sorrows.

Godfrey was just not wired like the others, as much as he wished he could be. When he found himself feeling overwhelmed, instead of being brave, like Kendrick or Reece or Gwendolyn, he became too frozen with panic to take action; instead of confronting his troubles, he would avoid them, and hope they would go away. Time after time, after a few strong drinks, he had been able to convince himself that everything would be okay, that he need not mettle in the troubles of the world—that he could leave that to others.

But this time, Godfrey sensed that things were different; this time, he knew, everything would *not* be okay. Here he was, in this foreign city, in this foreign bar, everything changed forever, and everything about to be changed forever. His old stomping grounds, King's Court, the old alleyways he had known, the old neighborhood, the old pubs —everything he knew would be wiped away. Soon nothing would ever be the same; soon, death would be coming for them, here, in this place.

The Shield was down. He could still hardly fathom it. That had always been everyone's greatest fear, ever since he was a child, and now it had come true. Godfrey knew that, especially in a time like this, he shouldn't drink, that he should stand up straight, be a man, hurry out there and join his sister and brother and all the others and confront the danger coming for the gates. He knew he should be more of a man than he was. And he knew that he had promised his sister he would never drink again.

He was disgusted with himself. Yet still, as much as he wanted to

be otherwise, he was overwhelmed with fear and inertia. He just could not get himself to get up, get out there, and do whatever it was that they needed. He was not a trained warrior, as his brothers were. He had never embraced the lessons in childhood, always refusing to obey his father. He did not actually have any real-life skill, other than knowing which pubs to frequent, and which bad company to choose.

As he sat there sulking, he felt as if he had wasted his life. He wanted desperately to change it. But he did not know how. And he could not help feel as if it were too late. After all, what could he, a single man, do against an army like Andronicus'? And he, hardly a trained warrior, no less. It all seemed so futile. If he were going to die, he might as well enjoy it.

One thing he could do, one thing he could control, was having one more drink, and numbing his worries as much as he could.

"Another!" Godfrey yelled to the bartender.

"And I!" echoed Akorth.

"And I!" cried Fulton.

Several patrons jostled in beside him, more and more pouring in, and Godfrey had to squeeze in ever tighter to the bar, packed shoulder to shoulder. His friends drank in despair, too, as did the other patrons in this place.

"I've never seen this place so jammed," the bartender said, as he slammed down their drinks. "War should happen more often," he added. "It seems every damn soul in the city wants to drown out his troubles."

"Well if it's our last day," Fulton said, "I sure as hell don't want to go down sober."

"Well said," Akorth roared. "Nor do I. If I'm going to die, why not die drunk?"

"What merit is there in being sober when being thrown into the earth?" Fulton added.

"Well," Godfrey said, playing devil's advocate, "there's one good reason to be sober: you could go out there and fight, and prevent yourself from dying."

"Ha!" Akorth scoffed. "I could fight just as well drunk!"

"Ay ay!" echoed Fulton. "Don't you know that half the soldiers out there are drunk anyway? Do you really think they fight sober?"

"None of it matters anyway," Akorth said. "Sober or not, do you really think one fighter can stop a million men?"

Godfrey couldn't help but agree with them. Yet still, he was disappointed with himself. He loved his sister Gwendolyn, and his brother Kendrick, more than he could say, and he felt as if he were abandoning them, as if he were a disappointment in their eyes. That was the one thing he did not want to be. He could be a

disappointment in his father's eyes—he had learned to live with that. But he had grown to love his siblings, especially Gwendolyn, and she had trusted in him, and he hated the idea of letting her down. Especially after she had saved him.

"For what has she saved me?" Godfrey called out, to himself.

Akorth and Fulton turned and looked at him, baffled.

"What are you talking about, boy?" Fulton asked. "Are you mumbling something?"

Godfrey felt that he was different than all these patrons in here. After all, he was the son of a King. He was made of different stock. He had something different within him. Shouldn't he be acting differently? These people had never had a chance in life. But he'd had more than a chance—he had had it all.

Or did he? Was all that just rubbish, all this talk of his being a MacGil, of his being the son of a king? Did it not mean anything after all? Was he, at the end of the day, just as good as everyone else, no matter who they descended from?

As Godfrey took a deep drink of yet another beer, the answers to all these questions eluded him, swarming in his buzzing mind. He did not know if he'd ever get to the bottom of it.

The door to the pub suddenly slammed open and all heads turned, as in marched a beautiful woman. Godfrey turned, too, and blinked several times, trying to focus, to remember who she was. And then he realized, with a start: Illepra. The healer who had saved his life.

Illepra looked more beautiful than ever, wearing her brown leather outfit, her hair tasseled and long, her green eyes gleaming. Her eyes locked on his as she marched his way, cutting through the pub, oblivious to all the patrons crowding around her.

They parted ways, making room for her, all the drunk men seeming surprised at the touch of beauty entering this place.

"I was told I could find you here," Illepra said accusingly to Godfrey as she marched up close to him, frowning. The room grew quiet, watching the confrontation.

Godfrey could hardly believe that she had sought him out, here in this place. They had talked the whole way on their march from King's Court to Silesia. He had felt a bond with her from the first time they'd met, and during their walk, their connection deepened. He had promised her that he would change, that he would give up drink and take up arms with his siblings.

And yet here he was. His face reddened, as he felt an ever deeper sense of shame.

"You disgrace your family," she added harshly. "Is this why I saved you? So you could hide here, at our darkest hour, and drink life

away? To laugh with your friends? Is that what's important to you now, while your siblings are out there, preparing to fight for our lives?"

Godfrey looked down in shame. He had no answer. He had been thinking the same exact thing himself.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You are right. I don't deserve to be up there with him. I never did. I'm sorry. I do not mean to let you down."

"Then answer me this," she insisted, her eyes flashing, "for what reason did I save your life, if you will not even take up arms to defend it?"

Illepra turned, angry, examining all the faces in the bar.

"I speak to all of you," she said, raising her voice. "All of you hide in here, while your countrymen are out preparing. Not one of you is willing to go out there and take up arms to save your life. Forget about your life—what about the lives of others? Your people need you. Are you all that selfish? Is that what they are fighting for? To save the likes of you?"

All the patrons stared back, silent.

"If we fight or not, miss," one patron yelled out, "it ain't make any difference. A million men won't hardly be stopped by a few thousand."

There came a grunt of approval throughout the room.

"No, maybe they can't," Illepra reasoned. "But that doesn't mean that we do not try. One day, we will all die. It is not about who lives and who dies. It is about *how* we live. And *how* we die."

She turned and stared at Godfrey.

"I thought you were different," she said softly. "I thought you had the potential to be something greater. But now I see I was wrong. You are just another drunk. As the whole kingdom says you are."

"There's nothing wrong with that miss!" Akorth called out in his defense, raising his mug. "You can die in here or you can die out there. But at least my friend will die happy!"

The crowd cheered in approval, raising their mugs.

Illepra reddened, turned on her heel, and stormed from the pub.

As the patrons slowly went back to their business, Godfrey watched her go, burning up inside. Fulton reached over and patted him on the back.

"Women are that way," he said consolingly. "They don't know what's important. You're doing the right thing—have another!" he said, sliding another mug his way.

As Godfrey looked down at the mug, something rose up within him. It was a new feeling, something he had never experienced before. It was a sense of pride. A sense of something bigger than himself. For the first time in his life, he did not think of himself. He did not think

of the next drink.

Instead, he thought of the Ring. Of Silesians. Of putting others first.

The more he thought of it, the more his fears began to dissipate. The more he pondered helping others, the less he afraid he became for himself.

Godfrey had enough. Suddenly he threw down his mug, jumped up from the bar and began to hurry through the crowd, towards the door.

“Where are you going?” Akorth called after him.

Godfrey turned and looked at his friends one last time, before heading out the door.

“I’m going to don armor, take up arms, and help my sister!” he announced gravely.

His friends laughed at him.

“You’ve never taken up arms in your life!” Fulton yelled.

Godfrey stared back, reddening, undeterred.

“No, I haven’t,” he admitted. “But I shall learn. Or I shall die trying!”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Gwendolyn stood atop the highest parapet in Silesia, her generals around her, watching the horizon. They had just finished a tour of all the inner and outer rings of defenses, and one by one, Srog, Kendrick, Brom, Kolk and the generals had discussed with Gwendolyn how best to fortify each one, what to expect when the army arrived, how to defend attacks from multiple fronts, and how long it would take until their defenses collapsed. They had talked about food and provisions and water, had talked about contingency plans, about retreating to the lower city. They had covered nearly everything, and they were all exhausted.

What none of them had discussed was what they would do in case of a defeat. It was unspoken amongst them that surrender was not an option, but none had discussed the inevitable: what to do if all their men were killed. It was unspoken amongst them that they would all fight to the death. In some ways, it felt as if they were all settling in for what would be a mass suicide.

Hours had passed, and with all their men in position, all the plans thought through, there was nothing left to discuss. Now they all stood there, comfortable in each other's silence, watching the horizon, the dark storm clouds forming, waiting for the inevitable. As Gwen looked out, it seemed so peaceful, so calm; it seemed as if Andronicus' men would never come.

Yet she knew they were coming. All day long, reports had come in from messengers from all over the Ring updating her on the invasion. There even arrived a report that King's Court had been attacked—and that was the report that hurt the most. She tried to blot the image from her mind.

Now, more than ever, Gwen wished Thor were here. Argon's fateful words rang in her head, and she did not understand what they meant. She knew she would have to die a little death to make up for saving Thor's life. Did that mean she would actually die? Here, in this place? She closed her eyes and thought of the baby in her belly and tried not to think of death. Not because she feared her own death. But because she feared for her baby's life; and she feared a life without Thor.

There was a stir, and Gwendolyn turned and looked over the men's shoulders to see a small entourage of soldiers coming their way —and her eyes opened wide in surprise as she saw who they were accompanying. There, marching towards her, was a woman she thought she'd never lay eyes upon again: her sister.

Luanda walked hand-in-hand with her new husband, Bronson,

who, Gwen was saddened to see, was missing a hand. They both looked tattered, broken, and beyond exhausted; they looked as if they had been riding all night.

Gwen could not understand what they were doing here. She was relieved to see them, but also confused. Wasn't Bronson a McCloud, and shouldn't he be on the McCloud side of the Ring? And Luanda with him?

Gwen was so relieved to see her sister alive, safe, her first impulse was to step forward and give her a hug. But growing up, their relationship had always been at arm's length, formal; it was Luanda's doing—she got that from their mother. Gwendolyn had tried one too many times to get close to her, and after enough rebuffs, she had learned her lesson. So Gwen simply stood there, facing her older sister, and nodded back gravely.

"My sister," Luanda said, as Bronson bowed his head.

Gwendolyn nodded back.

"Brother," Luanda added, turning and nodding to Kendrick, who nodded back, silent, probably as confused as Gwendolyn was. He seemed to tense up at the sight of a McCloud near him, as did the other soldiers.

"What are you doing here?" Gwendolyn asked.

"I made a grave mistake," Luanda said, "in going to the McCloud side of the Ring. Not a mistake in marrying Bronson, who I love dearly, and who is nothing like the others. The other McClouds are brutal, savage people. His father tried to kill both myself and his own son."

There came a surprised gasp from amongst Gwen's people, and she examined Bronson and saw the severed hand, the scars; she could tell he had been through hell, yet he stood there proudly. There was something about him that she liked; he seemed nothing like his father, who was a real brute, who Gwendolyn remembered with distaste.

"The McClouds don't change," Kendrick piped in. "They are who they are. They always have been."

"You are lucky to have escaped with your life," Brom added.

"We have come to ask you for help," Luanda said, looking from Kendrick to Srog to Brom—to anyone but Gwendolyn. "We ask you to take us in. We were told that the worthy half of King's Court had fled here. We want to defect from the McCloud side of the Ring. We want to be with the MacGils."

"To *fight* with the MacGils," Bronson added proudly. "I will swear my loyalty to you. I will fight to the death for you. Especially against my father and his men."

Gwendolyn and the others exchanged a glance, and she could see the hesitation in their eyes.

“And how do we know we can trust you?” Brom asked, stepping forward and staring McCloud down coldly. “Your father killed more of my men then I can count. And all in a brutal and cowardly way. How do we know the son is not like the father? How do we know this is not all a trap, that you are not merely waiting to betray us?”

Bronson slowly raised his arm, displaying the stump where his hand once was.

“This is my father’s work,” he said grimly. “What was once between us is no longer. I would gladly be first to kill him in battle.”

Brom stared back, as if summing him up, and finally seemed to believe him.

Gwendolyn believed him, too. He seemed to be an honest and sincere man.

“You are family,” Gwen said to Luanda, breaking the silence. She turned to Bronson. “And that means you are family now, too. If she loves you, that is good enough for me. We accept you with open arms.”

Bronson nodded back, his eyes flooding with appreciation.

“Andronicus will soon attack, and we will be in for a siege,” Gwendolyn warned. “We will need every hand we can get.”

“I am honored to fight for your cause, my lady,” Bronson said.

Luanda gave Gwendolyn a puzzled look.

“Who is in charge here?” Luanda asked, looking from face to face. “With Gareth in King’s Court, I presume that leaves you, Kendrick? Or is it you, Srog?”

All the others exchanged confused glances; Gwen realized that no one had told Luanda yet.

“Our sister is now ruler of the Western Kingdom of the Ring,” Kendrick answered.

“*Gwendolyn*?” Luanda said derisively, disbelieving. She looked Gwen up and down, shocked. “*You*? Ruler?”

“It was our father’s dying wish,” Kendrick said firmly.

“But…but,” Luanda began flustered. “You are a woman. And my *younger* sister, besides. If one of us should rule, then why would it not be me?”

Gwen felt the old childhood rush of anger towards Luanda rise up within her. Her entire life, as long as she could remember, her sister had been deathly jealous of her. Clearly, nothing had changed.

“*My Lady*,” Steffen interjected.

Luanda looked down at Steffen with surprise and condescension.

“Pardon me?” she said.

Steffen stepped forward, frowning.

“You will address Gwendolyn, who is now our queen, as ‘*my lady*,’” he said, defensive.

Luanda looked down at him in surprise, then looked at the set faces of the others and realized he was serious. She looked at Gwen with consternation.

"You don't seriously expect me to have to answer to my younger sister?" Luanda asked, turning to Kendrick.

"You *will* answer to her," Kendrick said darkly, "if you wish to stay here. Or, if you wish, you can leave the gates of Silesia, and be at the mercy of the enemy. You will respect our late father's wish, as the rest of us do."

Bronson reached over and laid a hand on Luanda's wrist.

"Luanda," he said softly, "your sister has been most kind and generous to accept us here. I see no reason why we should not answer to her."

But Luanda's eyes flashed with defiance and ambition, as they always had.

"Father always made bad decisions," Luanda seethed. "This is how we got into this mess to begin with. Do you really think that you, of all people, are capable of ruling this people?" she asked Gwendolyn. "Don't you feel ashamed to even try? Won't you feel terribly guilty if you fail, if you lead them all to their deaths?"

"We are all heading towards our deaths anyway, Luanda," Gwendolyn said calmly. "The question is not if we die. It's how we live. And yes, to answer your question, I am capable of leading this people," she said, a new strength rise within her, actually feeling capable for the first time, now that she was defending herself. "I don't have to explain myself to you. As Kendrick said, if you don't like it, our gates are open for you to leave."

Luanda flushed, turned, and stormed away.

Bronson stood there, shifting, clearly embarrassed.

"I am sorry for her," he said. "I am sure she does not mean it. We have been through an ordeal."

"She *does* mean it," Gwendolyn said. "She has always meant it. That's who she is."

Bronson lowered his head.

"I, for one, am most deeply grateful for your having us here. I will speak with her. She will come around."

Bronson quickly bowed, and hurried after her.

There was a sudden commotion down below, and Gwen looked down over the parapets to see a woman come running up to the gates, hysterical. Two guards tried to hold her back, and she screamed, flailing, trying to push past them.

"Let me pass!" she shrieked. "You must let me pass! I must see the Queen!"

"Let her through," Gwendolyn called down.

The guards turned and looked up at her and released their grip on the woman.

As soon as they did, she ran through the gates and up the spiral stone staircase, right for Gwendolyn, weaving through the group of soldiers, crying. She stopped before her, knelt and lowered her head. The woman was sobbing and shaking, and Gwendolyn's heart broke; she reached down, and gently helped pull the woman up.

"You needn't kneel before me," Gwen said compassionately.

"My lady," the woman heaved, between sobs. "You must help me! You must! Please!"

"What is it that troubles you?" Gwen asked.

"My village—it has been evacuated. They say the Empire is coming. Everyone ran. But my daughters are back there, in the House of the Sick. They cannot walk. I could not carry them with me—and the others left too quickly. I have no one to help me. Please! They are my babies!"

Gwen's heart broke inside, hardly able to comprehend this woman's suffering.

"We are hearing similar reports from across the Ring, of villages being raided," Srog said.

"I am sorry," Gwendolyn said to her. "And what would you have us do?"

"Please, send your men, before it's too late. Fetch my daughters, bring them here. I can't imagine their dying all alone, at the hands of those savages. It's too cruel."

"We might all die here, too," Kolk said.

"If they are to die, let them at least die here, with me," the woman said. "Don't them die alone out there. *Please*. You are a woman—you understand. You must help me!"

The woman reached out and grabbed Gwendolyn's hand roughly, and Steffen stepped forward and threw her hand off.

"Do not lay your hands on our Queen," Steffen rebuked, standing between them.

"It's okay," Gwendolyn said.

She reached up and stroked the woman's hair.

"This woman has been made mad by her grief," Gwen continued. "I understand the touch of grief, all too well."

Gwen thought of her father, and kept back tears.

"I empathize for your daughters," Gwen said. "I really do. But you must also understand that we are receiving reports of villages being pillaged, people murdered, from all corners of the Ring, and that we cannot spare our men to send out to each and every one. We are also in the final stages of securing our gates and locking down this city, for the good of all the Silesians and the remainder of King's Court, and

the thousands of lives here. We need every hand we have. Most of all, if we were to send a party out there now, for your girls now, they would not make it back alive. The Empire is too close at this point. Our men would die, and your girls would die with them."

Gwendolyn sighed. She hated having to make these decisions, but she felt that she had an obligation to look out for the good of her people.

"I'm so sorry," she concluded. "I pine for your daughters. I really do. But war is among us. And hard decisions need to be made."

"NO!" the woman shrieked, breaking out into a wail. She threw herself face-down to the floor, shrieking and wailing. "You can't let my daughters die!"

Gwendolyn looked away, out to the horizon, wishing she had never met this woman. She was beginning to feel what it felt like to be a ruler; she did not like the feeling.

"I will go for them," came a voice.

Gwen turned and saw Kendrick step forward, hand on his hilt, standing nobly, proud and unflinching.

Gwendolyn looked at her brother, touched and inspired.

"You understand that if you leave, we cannot reopen the gates for you," she said softly. "You will die out there."

He nodded gravely.

"What better way to die than in a service such as this?" he replied.

Gwendolyn breathed sharply, taken aback by his chivalry, his fearlessness. She loved her brother more than ever in that moment; yet she also felt profoundly sad at the thought of him on this mission.

All the other soldiers stared grimly, no one able to rebut him.

"I will join you," Atme said, stepping forward beside Kendrick.

Kendrick nodded back at his friend.

"Thank you! Thank you!" the woman cried, rising to her knees and kissing their hands.

Gwendolyn sighed.

"Kendrick, I cannot say no to you. You lead by example, as you always have. You do our father's name great honor to accept this mission upon yourself. You have my blessing. Go, and save these girls. I will keep these gates open for you as long as I can—up until the very last second when Andronicus attacks."

"My lady, I admire Kendrick's courage, and I don't disagree with his mission," Srog said gravely. "But I must warn that it takes time to seal the outer gates. It will not be easy to do with such short notice. You must realize that you jeopardize the entire city to agree to this mission, and to keep the gates open as long as you will."

Gwen turned and looked out at the horizon. Somewhere out there

were this woman's daughters, sick, alone. She could not stand the thought of it.

"I thank you for your counsel, my Lord," she said softly to Srog. "I do understand the consequences. I will not jeopardize our people. The gates will be closed when necessary."

She turned to Kendrick.

"Go. Find these girls, and return quickly. I do not wish to close these Gates with you outside them."

Kendrick nodded gravely, then turned and hurried down the parapet, Atme at his side.

The other men dispersed, and Gwen turned and walked by herself down a stone embankment at the far end of the parapets, so she could have some time alone, to process it all—and so she could have a better vantage point to watch Kendrick and Atme ride off. She stood there, at the very edge of the fortifications, watching them ride away into the horizon, raising a great cloud of dust.

As she stood there, feeling more alone than ever, she craved for Thor. She felt increasingly that they were facing a battle they could not win, and deep down, she felt that their only hope was Thor, the Destiny Sword, getting the shield back up. If she was going to die, she wanted to die with Thor at her side.

She closed her eyes tightly and prayed to God with all she had that Thor returned to her.

Please, God. I know I have asked you too much already. But I ask you one more thing: return Thor to me.

"God has a mysterious way of answering."

Gwendolyn did not need to turn to recognize the voice.

She turned and saw, standing there, Argon. He stood a few feet beside her, looking out at the horizon, watching Kendrick ride off, his eyes aglow.

Her heart lifted to see him.

"I never thought I would see you again," she said.

"Why? Because you are in a new place? Physical barriers don't mean anything to me."

"So then will you be here with us? During the siege?" she asked hopefully.

"I am always here with you. Sometimes not always physically."

Gwen was burning for answers.

"Tell me," she said, "I beg you. Is Thor safe?"

"He is now."

"*Will* he be?" she pressed.

"That is always the question, isn't it?" he asked, turning to her and smiling mysteriously. "His destiny is murky. It is set—yet it can be changed. As with all of us."

“Will he live?” she asked. “Will I ever see him again?”

She braced herself for the answer, hoping and praying it was a yes.

“If not in this world,” Argon said slowly, “then in the next.”

Gwendolyn felt her heart sinking.

“But is not fair!” she protested. “I *must* see him again!”

“He chose his destiny,” Argon said. “You chose yours. Sometimes destinies cannot intertwine.”

“And what of the Empire?” Gwen asked. “Will they attack this place?”

“Yes,” he said flatly.

“Will we be victorious?”

“Victory is relative,” he answered. “There are all types of victory. The red walls of Silesia have stood for one thousand years. But even these walls are meant to fall.”

She felt an increasing sense of foreboding.

“Does that mean this city will fall?”

She *had* to know. But he would not answer, looking away.

“But surely there must be some way to stop them!” she said.

“You focus too much on the here and now,” Argon said. “But there are other centuries. Centuries before yours—and centuries to come. We are but a speck in the wheel of time. People will die—and people will be born. Places will fall, and others will be built. Nothing lasts forever. Not even destruction.”

Gwendolyn stood there, thinking about all he said. She wondered if that meant there was hope.

“I feel inadequate,” Gwendolyn said. “As if somehow this is all my fault. As if all of these people would benefit from a ruler greater than me.”

He turned and looked at her, his eyes searing.

“The Ring has never had a ruler greater than you,” he said. “And it may never again.”

Her heart soared and she felt a great sense of encouragement at his words. For the first time, she felt legitimate.

“Tell me,” she said, desperate to know. “How will it all end?”

Slowly, Argon shook his head.

“Sometimes before the greatest light, there comes the greatest darkness.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Krohn whined and licked Thor's face until finally, slowly, Thor opened his eyes. He discovered himself lying face-first on the sand; sand was in his lips, on his tongue, in his eyes.

Thor blinked several times, then slowly sat up, wiping away the sand and reaching over and kissing Krohn and stroking his head. He looked around, trying to get his bearings, to remember where he was.

Beneath the muted light of the first sun, Thor saw all of his friends spread out on the beach, supine in the sand around him. Thankfully, they all looked alive—and after doing a quick head count, he saw they were all there. All of them, plus one: a girl, with long, tousled hair spread out on the sand.

Thor tried to remember. Suddenly, it came rushing back: the slave girl, the one Elden had saved. He sat up, squinting, stretching his aching muscles, trying to remember exactly what had happened.

The last thing he remembered, he was on fire, jumping into the icy-cold water of the rapids. Luckily he had been but a few feet from the water when he caught fire, and it all happened so quickly, he had landed in the water before the flames could burn him. He checked his skin, and while he was sore, his muscles aching, and all bruised up, he was not burnt. He sighed in relief.

Thor remembered the wild ride downriver, all of them tumbling end-over-end in the rapids, thrown downstream. He remembered glancing back, once, right before his head impacted with a log, and seeing the group of Empire soldiers, already far upriver, all consumed by an enormous burst of flame.

Thor reached up and felt a big lump on his head, sore to the touch, and realized he must have passed out along the way. They all somehow made it to this shore, and must've slept the night here. It was a narrow, smooth white beach, beside a raging river. The sound of the raging water was relentless, and Thor rose and turned and looked in all directions, wanting to see what else was out there.

On the other side of the beach stood a grove of trees, and behind it the river forked, splitting off in a calm, peaceful current. The grove led into a deep and broad forest, a winding trail leading into it. They seemed to have washed up at an intersection of sorts.

"And we thought you were going to sleep all day," came a voice which Thor dimly recognized.

Thor spun, as did Krohn beside him, and could not believe who he saw standing there, behind him. Three boys, legion members, dressed in shiny new armor, bearing new weaponry, and staring down at him with a look he'd encountered his entire life.

It was the three people he had been raised to believe were his three brothers: Drake, Dross and Durs.

Thor was speechless.

Thor couldn't imagine what they were doing here, and he rubbed his eyes, wondering if he were dreaming. But they were still there, and he realized it was real.

Thor rose to his feet, eyes wide with wonder, trying to comprehend it all.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "How did you get here?"

All around Thor, his Legion brothers began to arise, the slave girl, too, slowly gaining their feet, brushing off the sand, and gathering around Thor. They all looked back at Drake, Dross and Durs with equal looks of wonder.

"We came here to help," Drake said. "We were sent by Kolk, shortly after you left. We followed your trail. After you left they felt bad, the six of you going it alone. They wanted to send you reinforcements."

"They also received new information," Dross said, stepping forward with a scroll in hand, "from a thief they caught connected to the theft of the Sword. He confessed as to where in the Empire it was being taken. He drew us a map."

Dross rolled out the scroll before them, and they all gathered around and examined it.

"We know where they're going," Durs said. "We've come to lead you there. And to help you make it back alive."

"And why didn't you volunteer to help us sooner?" Reece shot back, defensive.

"You come now," Elden added, guarded. "Only when you are commanded to."

"We are doing just fine without your help," O'Connor said.

"Are you?" Drake asked, looking them up and down with contempt. "It looks to me as if you're lost, all washed up and bruised from battle."

"You've even managed to pick up baggage along the way," Dross added, looking contemptuously at the slave girl.

Thor, though guarded, appreciated their being here, and wanted to diffuse the argument.

"How did you find us?" Thor asked.

"A good tracker and plenty of King's Gold," Dross answered. "We managed to follow your trail. Quite a calamitous one. Amazing that you escaped from Slave City the way you did. We circumvented it ourselves, but luckily the rapids lead but one way, and we had only to follow them to lead to you. Hard to miss: the seven of you sprawled out on the sand like a bunch of drunks. I'd say you are all hardly

inconspicuous."

The three brothers laughed derisively.

"Way to set up camp," Durs added.

Thor reddened, and saw his Legion brothers seething.

"Like they said," Thor said, assuming authority. "We don't need your insults. Or your help. We made it this far on our own—and without a map, without a tracker, and without King's Gold."

The three brothers looked at him with something like surprise, and Thor was impressed by the authority in his own voice. His entire life he had been bullied by these three boys, and he wasn't about to be bullied by them now, to have them assume control of the mission. He knew their nature—and it was not kind. Whatever help they were offering, he was sure it was only because they were commanded to, or only for their own personal gain upon their return. He knew that, deep down, they didn't truly care for him.

He expected their faces to harden, for them to argue with him, as they always did, to try to demean him. But to his surprise, Drake's face softened and he stepped forward and lowered his voice.

"Thor, we understand you're upset with us. In fact, it is warranted. We were not kind to you as brothers. For that, we apologize. We are not here to demean you, or to undermine your authority. We realize you have command of this mission. We sincerely wish to help you. Please. The fate of the entire Ring is at stake, and the map we hold is invaluable."

Thor was caught off guard by Drake's kind tone, at his deferring to his authority. He had never seen them like this. It was surreal, as if he were not looking at the same three people.

He thought of what he'd said, and it made sense. The fate of the Ring was what was most important, whatever personal differences they had. And despite the past, Thor was always willing to give someone another chance—especially if they seemed sincere.

Slowly, he nodded back to them.

"In that case," he said, "we shall be pleased to have you."

The three of them nodded back, pleased. Thor looked past them, at the fork in the river, and saw their longboat anchored at its shore; it looked like a long canoe, large enough to hold maybe a dozen.

"To reach the thieves' destination," Dross said, looking down at the map, "we must get back on the river and take it south. It will bring us to a great lake, and then to other channels. It is the most direct way to find them, cutting them off and gaining us time. If you agree, let us leave at once—we haven't any more time to waste."

They all began to turn and head for the boat—when the slave girl stepped forward.

"You are wrong!" she yelled out.

They all stopped and turned and looked at her.

"The thieves would not have gone that way," she said. "I don't care what your map says. I know my native land better than you. Do you see that forest?" she asked, turning and pointing to the grove of trees. "That is where they went."

"And how would you know that?" Drake asked her.

"Because this river leads to death," she said. "It is not a path they would take. To cross the great divide, there is no safe way but through this forest. It borders the desertlands."

Thor looked at the trees, then back to the rapids, and wondered.

"And who is this woman who knows everything?" Durs sneered.

Elden stepped forward and draped an arm around her shoulder.

"She is a girl I freed from Slave City," Elden said, "and I trust her. She led us out of there."

"You don't even know her," Drake said.

"I know her enough," Elden said.

"And then what is her name?" Dross asked.

Elden blushed, and the three brothers laughed at him.

"In these lands we are forbidden to have a name," she called out. "But I have taken a secret name upon myself. It is Indra."

"Well, Indra, we are not interested in your tribal tales. We are men, and we fear no river. We go where the thieves lead us—and we will take this river where it leads," Drake said firmly. "If you are afraid of water, you can stay on dry land. This is a mission of the Legion: no one is asking you to join us."

The three brothers all turned and headed for the boat, and as the others looked to Thor, he stood there, wavering. His logic told him to go to the boat; yet something inside him was wavering.

He finally walked to Indra.

"Come with us to the boat," he said. "If we don't find what we need, we can always turn back and follow your trail."

She slowly shook her head.

"That river leads to darkness and death," she said, throwing off Elden's hand, and storming for the boat. She nonetheless joined the others as they entered the boat. Before she did, she looked back at Thor angrily.

"Just be prepared," she said, as Thor and the others piled in. "You board a boat to hell."

* * *

They all paddled on the still waters of a vast lake, and Thor wondered if this would ever end. They had all been paddling for

hours, and finally settled into a comfortable silence, paddling in unison as this new body of water seemed to stretch forever. It felt like an ocean, with no land in sight, yet its waters were completely still, with no breeze to be had.

Thor was still trying to process seeing his three "brothers" again, their new kindness to him, and what this could mean for their mission. If their map was accurate and not the dream of some desperate thief, then their appearance could be a godsend, exactly what they needed to find the Sword and bring it back. But the words of the slave girl rang in his head, and he could not help wondering, with every stroke, if they were going the wrong way, if his brothers were being played by this thief and his map.

"Where are you from?" Elden asked the girl softly, seated beside her. Thor was but a few inches away, and could not help but hear, despite Elden's speaking softly. Elden had been trying to engage her for quite some time, and she had seemed aloof. Thor could see that Elden had taken a real liking to her. It was the first time he had seen Elden this way.

"From a place you've never heard of," she answered, "and a place you'd never want to go. It's just another slave town on the periphery of the Empire. They rounded us up to Slave City about a year ago. Not all of us. Just me. My family, they killed on the spot."

Elden shook his head.

"You are a slave no more. Now you are free."

She shrugged.

"What does being free really mean? The entire Empire are slaves to the Empire. Show me a place that is truly free."

"The Ring is truly free," Elden insisted.

She grunted.

"And for how long?" she countered. "Soon you will be overrun, like us, and you will answer to the Great Andronicus. Just like all of us."

"Never!" snapped Elden. "You don't know me. You can't say that."

She shrugged.

"I know Andronicus. Nothing can stop him. Nothing. Not even your Ring, with its Canyon, and its missing Sword. You live in fantasy. I am a realist."

"You are a cynic," Elden corrected. "You clearly lost your ideals long ago. I myself have not. I will never become a slave. I will never answer to Andronicus. And my people will never go down. If they do, I will go down fighting with them."

She shrugged, unimpressed.

"Then you will go down," she said. "As I said, like everyone else,

you will succumb to Andronicus—one way or another."

The boat fell into a gloomy silence as they continued to paddle, deeper and deeper into the unknown, the only sound that of the lapping water.

The second sun climbed to its peak, burning hot, reflecting off of everything. The lake was like a huge mirror, shining white, light bouncing off of everything. It was like paddling into heaven.

Just as Thor was beginning to wonder, once again, if they were heading in the right direction, suddenly, a soft sound began to rise on the horizon. It was so soft, at first Thor wondered if he were imagining it. It sounded like a song, like a distant, soft song in a woman's voice, rising and falling. It sounded like a chorus of women. It was the sweetest and softest sound Thor had ever heard, echoing off the water. He wondered if he were dreaming.

From the looks on the faces of the others, who suddenly stopped paddling and looked in that direction, Thor knew he was not alone in hearing it.

"The song of the Sentions," Indra said, with fear. "You must turn the boat around!"

"What do you mean?" Thor asked, alarmed.

Indra looked frantic, looking every which way, as if trying to get off the boat.

"That island," she said, "it is an island of seductresses! The music is meant to draw passersby in. Music that men cannot resist. Once they arrive, they are killed and eaten. You must turn around at once!"

"You don't know what you're talking about," said Dross. "We are following the trail to the Sword."

But Thor was beginning to feel a strange feeling pass over him, a tingling throughout his body—a lust. The more he heard that music, the closer they came, the more this feeling intensified, the more he needed to hear it. He had never experienced anything like it—it was as if his body had been taken over by a life-or-death desire to hear their song. He would have killed anyone or anything that got in his way.

His fellow passengers—except for Indra—clearly all felt the same, turning towards it, hypnotized, paddling hard as a sudden current picked up and pulled them in one direction towards the music.

A small island began to come into view, in the center of which sat a round, low building, made of a shining white marble. On the shores of the island stood a group of women, wearing white flowing robes, with long brown hair spilling down to their lower backs, each leaning back, palms out, and singing. The chorus of voices grew louder, the tide stronger, and before he knew it, Thor and the others were at the edge of the island.

Thor's heart was pounding with a desire to be with these women; he could think of nothing else. He could not even think of Gwendolyn. It was as if his mind had been taken.

"Turn around!" Indra yelled, frantic.

But nothing could stop them now. The current grew even stronger, racing them towards the island, and in moments their boat was lodged firmly on the sand, several women waiting to pull it ashore. They reached out with their long, delicate hands and each grabbed a piece of the boat and pulled them up.

Thor was electrified by the feel of a woman's touch as she grabbed his, smiling and singing the whole time as she guided him off the boat onto the sand. He let her guide him, unable to resist, up a set of endless marble steps to their island. Beside him, Krohn snarled and whined, and Indra shouted. But Thor could barely hear them, all sounds but the song muted, fading. He walked with all of his legion brothers, all of them allowing themselves to be lead.

Each of the boys was led by a woman who took his hand, smiling sweetly, singing, leading them deeper and deeper into the island. As they went, Thor saw that the island was covered in the most beautiful fruit trees he had ever seen, orange and red and yellow fruits hanging low, branches flowering, flooding the place with delicate aromas. There also came the smell of distant cooking, making Thor's stomach growl.

Thor heard Indra screaming, then heard her being gagged and muffled; he turned and watched the women pounce on her, binding her hands behind her back and carrying her off. Some part of Thor wanted to help her, to stop all of this. But a bigger part of him was under a spell, so deep that he would have walked off the edge of the world if these women had led him there.

At last, he had found his true home. And he never wanted to leave.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Gwendolyn stood on the upper ramparts of the castle, Steffen by her side, watching for Kendrick, looking for any sign of him on the horizon. All around her, her men were busy preparing the final defenses, a group beside her groaning as they pushed yet another iron cauldron filled with boiling tar into place. Archers took up positions, hundreds of them, kneeling all about the walls, bows and arrows at the ready. Beside them sat dozens of attendants, young boys holding torches ready to be lit.

On the lower ramparts, hundreds more men took up positions with long spears; amidst these were dozens more with slings.

Down below, in the inner court, amassing behind the gates, were hundreds more soldiers, bearing swords and shields and every weapon imaginable. Her army grew with each passing moment, and Silesia was beginning to feel impenetrable. Gwen was feeling optimistic.

But she looked out again over the horizon, and reminded herself of what was coming. She had heard stories of Andronicus her entire life, and she knew that while Silesia had lasted a thousand years, this time would be different. She closed her eyes and prayed that she be given the strength to at least put up a noble defense. Whatever should come, whether they should all live or die, she just wanted to go down with honor.

Gwen opened her eyes and looked back at the horizon, and began to pace again. She was a nervous wreck, and having Kendrick out there didn't help. She could not imagine having to shut the gates on her brother. It was too painful to even contemplate.

"Watching the horizon won't make him come any faster," Steffen said, standing beside her.

She looked over, grateful, as always, for Steffen's presence. He had become her backbone throughout all of this, always at her side, always looking out for her, always there to offer a good word of advice or comfort. He was wise beyond his appearance, and she was viewing him more and more as a sounding board. He was also the one she could trust most, who had saved her life already twice; she was growing comfortable sharing with him even her most private thoughts.

"I don't think I could do it," she said to him, quietly. "Seal the gates with Kendrick out there."

"You will have to," he said. "That is what it means to be Queen. To put country before family. Your brother is but one; your people are thousands."

As she continued to pace, Gwendolyn knew that he was right. She

just prayed she would not have to be put in that position.

A trumpet sounded, and Gwen spun, staring back down at the road, wondering whose approach they were heralding. Her heart beat faster as she hoped to see Kendrick riding towards the place.

But her heart fell as she saw a small caravan and realized it was not him. It was a horse and carriage, coming from the road from King's Court. She was surprised: someone had made it out of there alive.

She was anxious to have the news. She took off down the twisting stone staircase until she reached the dusty inner court of Silesia. Steffen cleared a path for her between the soldiers, and she hurried down the middle as the inner gate was slowly opened.

The carriage came up to the entrance and pulled to a stop.

Several soldiers approached and opened the door, and Gwendolyn was shocked as she saw who came out.

There, standing before her, was a woman she was sure she would never see again.

Her mother. The former Queen.

And beside her, her devoted servant, Hafold.

Gwendolyn's mother stared back at her, one queen to another, and Gwendolyn felt torn with a myriad of emotions. She went from being shocked to see her, to relief that she was alive, to sadness and compassion for her state of health, to anger from all the old memories. She also felt a sudden defiance: if her mother had arrived here to try to tell her how to rule, she would hear none of it.

Most of all, she was bewildered. How was her mother, who was so sick, standing? And how had she escaped from King's Court?

"Mother," Gwendolyn said.

Her mother stared back, expressionless.

"Gwendolyn," she said, matter of factly. "I find myself in the odd and unfortunate position of having to ask my daughter to allow me into her court. Since the destruction of King's Court, of the one place I called home, I find myself homeless. A great army follows on my tail, and if you shut me out from your gates, I will die out there. However you may feel about me, surely that would not be a way to honor your father."

The crowd of soldiers around them grew quiet, and Gwendolyn felt them all watching the exchange between them. She took a deep breath, swirling with mixed emotions.

"I am not vindictive, mother," Gwendolyn said. "Unlike you. I would never throw you to the mercy of the Empire, regardless of the sort of mother you have been. Of course, you shall be welcome within our gates."

Her mother stared back, still expressionless, and gave her the

slightest nod.

"How did you recover?" Gwendolyn asked. "Last I saw you, you were unable to speak, or to move."

"I discovered she had been the victim of poisoning," Hafold said. "By her son, the King."

A gasp spread through the crowd, most of all from Gwendolyn. Despite the depth of Gareth's treachery, she had never imagined this. She shook her head involuntarily.

"Then we shall put you into the hands of Illepra, our healer who is here with us, and she will give you whatever help you need for a permanent recovery. I welcome you here, mother."

Her mother nodded, but stood where she was.

"I hear you are queen now," her mother said.

Gwendolyn nodded back, guarded, unsure where she was going with this.

"It is what your father wanted. I fought it. But now, finally, I see that it was a wise decision. Perhaps his *only* wise decision."

With that, her mother turned and walked past her, followed by Hafold, too proud to stop and say anything else.

Gwendolyn, knowing how proud her mother was, knowing that she'd never had a kind word for her, knew how hard it was for her to say something like that. She was touched. She wondered, for the millionth time, why she and her mother could not have been closer.

The carriage door opened yet again, and Gwendolyn turned and was surprised to see Aberthol exit the other side, walking slowly with his cane, the soldiers helping him.

He turned and walked with his distinctive gait towards Gwendolyn, smiling warmly as he approached.

She took several steps towards him, and gave him a hug. It warmed her heart to see her old teacher and her father's advisor again; it was, in some ways, like having a piece of her father there.

"Gwendolyn, my dear," he said slowly in his ancient voice. "Hugging a humble old man like me will not seem quite appropriate in front of all your new subjects," he said with a smile, pulling back. "You are queen now, after all. For that, I am very proud of you. And a queen must always act as a queen."

Gwendolyn smiled back.

"True," she said, "but being queen also gives me prerogative to give anyone I want to a hug."

He smiled.

"You always were too smart for your own good," he said.

"Seeing you here makes me fear the worst," Gwendolyn said, somber. "I have heard that King's Court was attacked. But knowing that you have fled your precious books makes me know now, for

certain, that it is true."

Aberthol's face fell, as he gravely shook his head.

"Burned," he said. "It's all been burned to the ground. We escaped the night before."

Gwendolyn, heart thumping, was afraid to ask the next question.

"And what of the House of Scholars?" she finally asked. Her heart pounded as she thought of the place that was a second home to her, that was more sacred to her than anything in the world.

Aberthol looked down sadly, and for the first time in her life, she watched a tear fall from his eye.

"Nothing remains," he said, his voice gravel. "Thousands of years of history, of priceless, precious volumes—all set aflame by barbarians."

Despite herself, Gwendolyn groaned; she reached for her heart, clutching her chest.

"All that remains are the few volumes I grabbed before fleeing, all I could fit in the carriage. A thousand years of history, of poetry, of philosophy—all of it, wiped away."

Gravely, he shook his head again and again.

"We will rebuild it," she said to him, laying a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "One day, we will get it all back again."

She tried to sound confident, to restore his spirits, but even she knew it could never be.

He looked up at her in doubt.

"Do you know what's coming for us on the horizon?" he said. "An army greater than anything your father had faced."

"I do," she said. "And I know who we are. We will survive. Somehow. And we will rebuild."

He looked at her, long and hard, and finally he nodded.

"Your father chose well," he said. "Very, very well."

Aberthol squinted, his face collapsing in a million lines.

"You remember your history?" he asked. "The Acholemes?"

Gwen wracked her brain, it slowly coming back to her.

"They were faced with a great siege," she said.

"The greatest siege in all the annals of the MacGils," Aberthol added. "They were but one hundred men—and they fended off ten thousand."

Gwen's eyes opened wide and her heart swelled with hope as the story began to come back to her.

"How?" she asked.

"They fought as one," he answered. "Battles are not always won by the sword. More often, they are won by the heart. By the cause. The book of the ancient language is filled with stories of few triumphing against many."

He sighed.

"When you rule these men," he said, "don't appeal to their weaponry. Look to their hearts. Each is a son, a father, a brother, a husband. Each has a reason to die—but each also has a reason to live. Find the reason to live, and you will find your path to victory."

He began to walk away, when suddenly he stopped and looked at her.

"Most importantly," he asked her, "ask yourself: what is *your* reason to live?"

She stood there, alone, his words ringing in her head. What was her reason to live?

As she pondered it, she realized she had two of them. She reached down and rubbed her stomach, then looked to the horizon and thought of Thor.

In that moment, she resolved to live.

No matter what, she would live.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Kendrick galloped on the dusty road, Atme at his side, charging into a horizon brewing with thick, gathering storm clouds. The sky thundered again and again, threatening rain. In the distance, finally coming into view, was the village the woman had told them about, and Kendrick was flooded with relief. It could not have come a moment sooner.

They had been riding for hours, and Kendrick's apprehension deepened as they continued farther from the safety of Silesia and closer towards the oncoming army, out there somewhere, heading right for them. Kendrick only hoped that they find the village, find the girl, and get back before Andronicus' men reached them—and before Silesia's gates closed on them.

Kendrick knew that this was a reckless mission; yet he also knew that this mission was the very core of who he was. He had taken a vow to help those who were defenseless, and that vow was sacred to him. For Kendrick, that was more important than his personal safety, and missions such as these, whether reckless or not, must be taken. He had heard the stories of Andronicus's brutality, and he knew what his men would do to the girls. That was something he could not allow, even if he had to go down fighting.

Kendrick rode harder, out of breath, giving it everything he had, and was encouraged as the village began to loom larger. It sat as a small dot on the horizon, just another farming town on the outskirts of the Ring, shaped in a circle, like most of them, with but a few dozen dwellings and a rudimentary town wall. He exchanged a knowing glance with Atme and they both rode harder, encouraged, determined to make it there before Andronicus—and rescue the girls.

As they got closer, Kendrick heard a distant rumble and looked up to see, in the distance, a group of a dozen soldiers come into view, galloping towards the village from the other direction. His heart beat faster as he saw they wore the black of the Empire. They were here. And they were both racing for the same town. Kendrick and Atme were much closer than they—but not by much.

The one thing that gave Kendrick comfort was that he did not see the entire army with them; rather, it seemed to be a small contingent. He realized instantly that it was an advance party, scouts, riding ahead to report back to the main army. Wherever there were scouts, the main army was never far behind—usually but a few minutes.

The urgency was even greater as Kendrick screamed and kicked his horse again, and the two of them charged right through the town gates. They rode down the narrow streets and looked side to side,

examining all the small, humble dwellings. This entire town was deserted, a ghost town; possessions were strewn all throughout the streets, and it was clear that the villagers had evacuated in a hurry. It was wise of them. They knew what was coming.

They rode block to block until finally, Kendrick spotted a dwelling larger than the others, with a red star painted on it. The House of the Sick.

They rode for it and as they reached the front, they each dismounted and sprinted through the open door. Before they did, Kendrick glanced over his shoulder and saw the scouts getting closer, hardly a minute away.

Kendrick and Atme sprinted through the building, past rows of abandoned beds. For a moment, he wondered if this place were vacant; he wondered if they had found the wrong place, or if the girls had already been moved somewhere. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the light, and as they did, he heard a soft cry.

They turned and in the far corner of the room lay the two sick girls, supine on their beds. They appeared to be maybe twelve years old, and they weakly reached out for him.

"Help!" one of them called.

The other was too sick to even lift her hand.

Kendrick darted across the room and hoisted one of the girls over his shoulder, moaning, while Atme grabbed the other. They then turned and ran back through the building, charging through the open door and to their horses.

They each mounted the girls on their saddles and prepared to jump up onto the horses—when suddenly, behind them, there came the dozen Empire soldiers, charging like a storm. There wasn't time, Kendrick realized. They would have to fight.

Kendrick and Atme turned and rushed forward to meet them, putting themselves between the contingent and the girls, drawing their swords with a distinctive ring and raising their shields.

The lead attacker brought his sword down and Kendrick raised his shield and blocked it at the last second—then parried back with his sword at the same moment, slicing the man's saddle, sending him flying off his horse and crashing down to the ground. Another attacked swung his axe for Kendrick's head, and Kendrick ducked, then stabbed him in the ribs, sending him off his horse screaming. Another attacker thrust a lance his way, and Kendrick spun and snatched it from his hands.

Kendrick held the lance to his shoulder and charged and knocked another attacker from his horse. He sent him flying back into another attacker, sending them both to the ground. Kendrick then pulled back the lance, took aim and threw it; it sailed through the air and killed

another attacker, piercing his armor and impaling his chest.

Kendrick, now weaponless, was vulnerable and had no time to react as another attacker leapt off his horse and tackled him, sending them both to the ground. They rolled and rolled, wrestling, and the soldier drew a dagger, raised it high, and brought it down for Kendrick's throat.

Kendrick caught his wrist in mid-air and held it there as they engaged in a power struggle, the soldier pushing down with all his might, sneering, and Kendrick barely holding it back, the tip just inches from his face.

Finally, Kendrick managed to twist the soldier's wrist to the side, then rolled and punched him with his gauntlet across the jaw, knocking him onto his back. He then punched the man one more time, knocking him out for good.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Kendrick spotted yet another attacker charging him, gearing up to kick him in the ribs; Kendrick thought quick, snatching the dagger that had fallen from the soldier's hand, turning and throwing it. The knife sailed end over end and lodged itself in the attacker's throat, stopping him in his tracks. He stood there, frozen for a minute, then keeled over to the side, dead.

Atme had been busy, too. Kendrick looked over to see five of the six soldiers who'd attacked him dead on the ground, all in various positions, their blood staining the earth. As he watched, Atme finished off the sixth, ducking below a sword slash, spinning around, and chopping of the man's head with his sword.

Kendrick and Atme both stood there for a moment, breathing hard in the sudden stillness, surveying the damage they had done.

"Like the old days," Atme said.

Kendrick nodded back.

"I'm glad it was *you* on my side," he answered.

There came a chorus of distant horns, and Kendrick felt a great tremor in the earth. He looked to the horizon and saw the faintest glimmer of dust arising. This time, it was not the dust of a dozen men —but the dust of a vast army, stretching as far as the eye could see.

The two of them wasted no time. They turned and ran for their horses, Kendrick mounting behind the sick girl, holding her tight with one arm as she wobbled limply on the saddle, and grabbing the reins with the other. Atme did the same, and in moments they were racing out of the town, through the entrance and back onto the road that led to Silesia.

Kendrick thought of the closing gates, and only hoped that it was not too late.

* * *

Gwendolyn stood atop a small hill outside the outer gate of Silesia, waiting, watching, her heart pounding. She had been scrutinizing the horizon for hours, praying for any sign of Kendrick as they counted down the hours, the minutes, until she would have to seal the gates.

"My lady," Steffen said, still standing loyally beside her, "you must retreat into the city! Waiting out here for Kendrick won't make him come faster—and it will only jeopardize your safety. Please: retreat to within our walls."

Gwendolyn shook her head.

"I cannot wait within the safety of our walls while he risks his life out there."

"But my lady, your people need you. They look to you."

"They also look to me as an example," she said, "of fearlessness. In war, that has merit, too."

"Well then if you won't go back inside, neither will I," he said.

Steffen fell silent, and the two of them continued to stand and watch.

Gwendolyn knew he was right, knew it was only a matter of time until she would have to order the outer gates sealed. Her heart was breaking inside.

She began to detect a distant rumbling, and her heart pounded as she looked up to see the entire horizon covered in black. More troops than she had ever seen in her life were stretched out before her, thousands and thousands of them, seeming to stretch across the entire world. In their center rode two dozen flag-bearers, waving the Empire colors high above their heads, and hundreds of trumpets sounded.

"My lady, we are out of time!" shouted Srog, riding up beside her with a dozen troops. "We must seal the gates!"

Gwen looked over her shoulder and saw her men, hundreds of them, anxiously preparing, taking up positions, spread out along the parapets. She then turned and looked back at the horizon. Reality was sinking in: here, at last, was Andronicus. And yet, still, there was no sign of Kendrick and Atme. Her heart fell. Had he been killed? She had never known him to be unsuccessful. How could it be? she wondered. Kendrick was their finest knight. If he had been killed, then what hope was there for any of them?

Gwen cursed herself for allowing him to go. She should have ordered him to stay put. She loved that he lived by his vow of honor—but in this case, chivalry had led to his death.

"My lady, you cannot stand here anymore!" Steffen yelled, and she could hear the agitation in his voice.

Gwendolyn knew the time had come. The army was getting closer, and in moments there would be no chance for her to enter her

own city walls. But she just could not bring herself to. Not until she knew for sure that her brother did not make it.

"My lady!" Brom urged, standing beside Srog. "If we wait any longer, our men will die!"

Suddenly, a small cloud of dust caught Gwendolyn's eye, off to the side; she turned, and on a small side road there, her heart was elated to see, rode Kendrick and Atme, carrying the two girls on their horses. They galloped towards them, outpacing the army, faster, and closer. They had a good hundred yards lead on them, and Gwen's heart soared to see them alive again.

They had made it. She could hardly believe it. They had made it!

Gwendolyn felt a huge weight lifted off her heart as she turned, mounted her horse, and began riding back for the open gates of Silesia, Steffen, Srog, Brom and dozens of soldiers accompanying her. As they went, more and more troops, waiting patiently for her, filled in behind them, and together they all raced back through the outer gates. As they did, dozens of men, waiting, began to close the massive iron gates from both sides.

They raced through just in time, the gate only left opened a few feet for them, and after they did, Kendrick and Atme, just feet behind her, raced through, too. The second they did, the heavy metal slammed behind them.

They continued riding, through the inner gates, and as they did, a second spiked iron gate slammed behind them.

As Gwendolyn rushed into the inner court, all around her, thousands of troops were rushing into position, chaos everywhere, the energy in the air frantic, the anticipation palpable.

"SOUND THE ALARMS!" she screamed, and as soon as she did, a chorus of horns erupted all around her.

Citizens ran to their homes and barred windows and doors, the courtyard emptying. Once inside, most rushed to their upper windows, leaving them open just a crack, to look out over the square, and to hold bows and arrows at the ready. Every last Silesian man, woman and child, Gwen knew, was prepared to join in and fight to the death here.

Her heart flooded with relief as Kendrick rode up beside her, he and Atme handing the sick girls to their mother, who embraced them with tears of joy, sobbing. She grabbed Kendrick's leg.

"Thank you," she said. "I will never be able to repay you."

Gwendolyn and Kendrick dismounted and embraced.

"You're alive," she said over his shoulder, so happy, and wishing for Thor to have the same fate, too. "And you saved their lives."

Kendrick smiled.

"There are many more to save," he replied.

Gwen had no time to respond, because suddenly, there came a horrific slamming against the outer gate, so fierce, it shook the entire city.

Kendrick took up his position with the rest of the Silver, while Gwendolyn ran, Steffen at her side, up the winding stone steps to the top of the inner parapet, wanting to get the best view.

As Gwen looked down there came another tremendous crash, and she was shocked by what she saw: Andronicus' army swarmed outside the city, and dozens of soldiers, in a coordinated charge, rammed their shields into the outer gate, putting their shoulders into it.

That was all just the prelude: these men stepped aside, and there came rolling forward a long, thick iron battering ram, on wheels, manned by two dozen men. They rushed forward, gained traction, and as Gwendolyn watched in horror, they rammed the outer gate, denting it, shaking the walls, and making some of the stone around her crumble.

"Awaiting your command!" Srog said, standing beside her.

"NOW!" she said.

"ARCHERS!" screamed Srog.

Up and down the parapets, archers pulled back on their bows, and found slots through every nook and cranny in the stone walls, taking aim below.

"FIRE!"

The sky turned black with the rain of arrows, thousands of them sailing through the air, finding targets below in the exposed Empire soldiers.

Screams rose up, as dozens of Empire troops keeled over on the ground, dead.

But Andronicus' army was well-disciplined: hundreds of soldiers took a knee, lined up in perfect rows, and fired right back up at the walls.

Gwendolyn stood there, amazed, her first time in the midst of a real battle, and she didn't even think to react. She felt a strong hand grab her shirt and yank her down, slamming her against the stone. She felt the breeze of an arrow as it sailed through the air, just missing her head, and looked over to see Steffen lying on the ground beside her. She lay there, her heart pounding, realizing how stupid she had been not to get down sooner, as all the other men around her had done. Steffen, once again, had saved her life.

Not everyone had been so fortunate. A boy, hardly older than Thor, stood a few feet away from her, staring down at the men, as if in shock, an arrow through his throat. He stood a second more, then toppled over the edge of the parapet and fell down onto the heap of bodies, fifty feet below.

“ARCHERS!” Srog screamed again.

Again, the Silesians took up their bows, re-strung, and fired down at the Empire.

More screams rang up, and more Empire troops fell.

But there came another volley, right back.

The battle intensified, and arrows sailed through the air in every direction, the Empire taking heavier casualties as most of the Silesians were spared, able to take cover behind the thick stone walls. But as the battle continued, more and more Silesians got killed as they fired. There were perhaps a dozen Silesian soldiers dead, compared to the hundreds of Empire—but the Silesians had fewer men to spare.

It was all happening so quickly, Gwen could barely process it. It had gone from absolutely nothing, from days of calm, of endless waiting, to a sudden, ferocious battle.

The Empire rolled the battering ram towards the gate once again, denting it further and shaking the ground as they struck it with a crash.

Kendrick stepped forward, rallying the Silver.

“CAULDRONS!” he screamed.

Kendrick rushed forward, Atme by his side, along with a dozen Silver, and together they hoisted a huge iron cauldron over the edge of the wall. Moments later, boiling tar came gushing over the edge, pouring down on the soldiers manning the battering ram. In perfect unison, a dozen Silver leaned over with their bows, arrows aflame, and fired.

Screaming erupted as the soldiers caught fire—stopping them just before they had time to ram the gate again.

But within moments, dozens more troops simply pushed the flaming soldiers out of the way and took up the battering rams themselves.

Gwen was struck with a hopeless feeling. The number of Empire troops seemed limitless, and no matter how many they killed, it seemed futile. For every hundred that died, two hundred more appeared. All the while, the horizon just continued to flood with them, as far as the eye could see, row after row, division after division, cramming together like a million worker ants. The death of several hundred Empire didn’t even put a dent in their forces.

Yet on the Silesian side, every single death had an impact. By any measure they were fighting tremendously well, holding off a huge army with a fraction of the men—yet still, they felt every loss—and Gwen saw their ranks beginning to thin, their munitions beginning to dwindle.

It was obvious that Andronicus had no regard for life, that he would just keep sending men to their deaths without another thought.

It even seemed as if that were his strategy—to just keep offering up as many of his own men as he could, until the Silesians ran out of arrows, tar, spears. Eventually, they would. Fighting against any other commander would have given the Silesians a chance; but against Andronicus, against a man who didn't even care about his own people, what chance was there? Gwen wondered. Was he that merciless to sacrifice so many thousands of his own people without a second thought?

As Gwen watched soldier after soldier fall to their deaths below, she realized that he was.

Before she could finish the thought, she caught a glimpse of something sailing at her out of the corner of her eye, and this time, she ducked in time. Inches over her head their sailed a huge, flaming boulder. It soared through the air, over the parapets, and landed inside the city. It landed deep in the ground, like a flaming comet, and impacted with such force that it shook the ground. After it landed it continued to roll, stopping only when it smashed into a stone wall in a burst of fire and flame.

Dozens of these flaming boulders suddenly soared through the air, one shattering the stone wall close to her head. Gwen, on her hands and knees, peaked through a slit to see that a row of catapults had been rolled forward, and dozens of soldiers were arming them with boulders, setting them aflame with some sort of liquid, cranking back the ropes until taught, then slicing to let it go.

The ground and walls shook all around her as these boulders flew through the air like arrows; scream rose up, and dozens of her men died.

"FIRE ON THE CATAPULTS!" Gwen shouted. "Aim for the men manning them!"

Her orders were shouted and repeated up and down the ranks, all along the parapets, and all the archers turned their attention from the troops manning the battering rams to those manning the catapults. A hail of arrows shifted towards them, wounding and killing most of the soldiers.

But the move must have been anticipated by Andronicus's men, because as soon as Gwen's archers stood and fired, exposed, they were fired upon themselves, dozens of spears hurling through the air and impaling them, Gwen was horrified to see. Their screams rose up, and their bodies toppled over the edge, crashing down below.

"I want to join!" yelled a voice. "I want to join the fighting!"

Gwendolyn turned and was shocked to see her brother Godfrey approaching, breathing hard, slightly overweight, huffing and puffing in his cloth armor, his face red from exertion, his eyes wide with fear.

"Get down!" she screamed, and Steffen yanked him down just in

time, as a spear soared over his head.

"I want to fight!" he cried. "Please! Give me a position!"

Gwendolyn looked at Kendrick, who nodded back.

"You can join my men," Kendrick said. "Have you ever fired a bow?"

"Of course!" Godfrey said. "Father had us all take lessons."

"But do you remember?" Kendrick pressed.

Godfrey stared back, wide-eyed, trembling.

"I think so," he said.

"Take this," Kendrick said, reaching over and handing him a spare bow and quiver. "And take up a position along this wall, with the archers. Stay low and don't expose yourself. Await my command!"

Godfrey did as he was told, hurrying over and taking up a position, kneeling down with shaking hands as he took an arrow from the quiver and loaded the bow. He was so nervous that he, fumbling, dropped the quiver, and his arrows all spilled out.

But then he regained himself, loaded an arrow, and stuck his head up for a moment over the stone wall. An arrow sailed by, just missing it, and he knelt back down, trembling.

"I told you to stay down!" Kendrick yelled.

"I'm sorry," Godfrey said. He looked as if he were about to cry.

"Don't give into your fear," Kendrick commanded. "Take a deep breath. Stay low to the ground, always."

Godfrey shut his eyes and breathed deeply, several times.

"ARCHERS!" Kendrick yelled. "FIRE!"

Godfrey opened his eyes, took aim through a slit in the wall, pulled the bow back with shaking hands, and fired. He watched through the slit in the wall.

His face fell as he realized that he missed.

But he placed another arrow on the bow, his hands a bit more steady this time, and took a knee, took careful aim, and fired.

"I got him!" he screamed in triumph. "I can't believe it! I really got him!"

Gwen was thrilled to see Godfrey out of the alehouse, fighting by their side. She was so proud of him.

On her other side, not far off, was her new brother-in-law, Bronson, who had been fighting nobly with the others, even with one hand, finding a way to fire arrow after arrow at Andronicus' men, and taking out many of them. Luanda was somewhere tucked safely inside the lower city, which she expected her to be.

All that was missing, she pained to think, was Thor.

Suddenly there came an unfamiliar noise, a loud creaking, and Gwen craned her neck and peeked through the slits of the stone wall to see what it was. Her heart fell.

Scores of Empire soldiers parted ways to make way as dozens of men pushed forward carts in the mud, on top of which were piled tall, wooden ladders. There must have been a hundred of them, and they heaved the carts closer and closer to the outer wall.

"TORCHES!" Kendrick screamed.

All up and down the parapets, soldiers and their attendants lit their torches.

"WAIT!" Kendrick screamed.

They all waited, the groaning of carts growing louder, Gwen's heart pounding, as the slew of ladders came ever closer. They were just a few feet away, and every impulse in her screamed out for the soldiers to employ the torches. But she deferred to Kendrick, allowing him, a veteran of battle, to command his men.

She waited and waited, watching the ladders lean up against her wall, sweat forming on her brow.

"NOW!" Kendrick finally screamed.

The Silesians rose up with a great shout, leaned over, and lit the ladders. One by one, the wooden ladders began to burn.

But not all the Silesians were successful: several of them, as they stood, were shot through the chest and eyes and throat with arrows; others were killed by spears and javelins. Gwen watched in horror as dozens of her men toppled over the edge, hurling down in a chorus of screams.

Many ladders were on fire—but many had also made it to the walls, already filled with Empire soldiers scrambling up like mad.

The Silesians broke into action, led by Kendrick, as he ran to the nearest ladder, raised his axe and swung, chopping it and sending it crumbling to the ground.

But Kendrick paid dearly for it: he shouted out in pain as an arrow pierced his bicep, blood squirting everywhere. He reached over and yanked it out, with another great scream.

His attendant was not so lucky; an arrow pierced him through the throat, and he collapsed to the ground, dead.

Soldiers up and down the parapets ran for the ever-increasing number of ladders, trying to fend them off. Godfrey, to his credit, stood and ran for one, screaming in his first battle cry; he seemed as if he had overcome something within him. As he approached, an Empire soldier was just reaching the top, about to climb over the stone wall, when Godfrey charged and ran his spear right through him.

The Empire soldier shrieked, staring blankly Godfrey, who stared back, equally shocked; he hesitated for a moment, then began to fall backwards. But before he did, he reached out and grabbed Godfrey by the shirt and yanked him back with him.

Godfrey screamed as he went rushing towards the edge. He

reached out at the last second and grabbed the stone, bracing himself before he went over. He was struggling with all he had, but his grip was slipping. Gwendolyn saw that he was about to die.

Gwendolyn, without thinking, rushed into action. She sprinted forward, grabbed a forgotten sword from the ground, its hilt bloody, and right before her brother lost his grip, she rushed forward, raised the sword and chopped off the soldier's hand which was grabbing Godfrey.

The soldier, screaming, fell backwards down the ladder, taking several men with him. Godfrey stumbled backwards, free from the grip, and looked over at Gwen wide-eyed, in shock.

"The ladder!" she screamed.

She ran forward and grabbed one end of the ladder, and he snapped out of it and grabbed the other. Steffen, right behind her, came up in the middle. Together, the three of them heaved and pushed the ladder off the wall, sending it crashing down to the ground.

But there were too many ladders and not enough men to be everywhere at once; the first bunch of Empire soldiers jumped over the parapets, and soon, the parapets were filled with them. Gwendolyn's heart pounded as she saw men running towards her from all sides.

"SWORDS!" Srog screamed out to his men.

Hand-to-hand fighting broke out all around her, preoccupying her men and forcing them to abandon attacking the soldiers below. This left the Empire men freed up to concentrate once again on ramming the iron gates of the outer defenses; again and again, the battering ram shook the walls, with enough force to make Gwen and the others stumble.

The gates were riddled with huge dents, and beginning to buckle.

"My lady, we have to get you inside, to safety!" Steffen yelled, frantic.

But Gwendolyn did not want to leave her men; she was about to look over the wall, to assess the damage being done to the gates, when suddenly an Empire soldier jumped over the railing beside her, reached over and backhanded her, sending her flying backwards. Gwen's world filled with pain as she reeled from the sting of the blow on her face, shocking her.

The soldier then pounced on her; Gwendolyn rolled out of the way at the last second, as the soldier went to punch her and just missed, punching stone. She drew a dagger from her belt, spun around, and thrust it into the back of the soldiers neck. His body went limp.

Gwen felt numb; she could scarcely believe she had just killed a

man. It made her sick. Inside, she was shaking.

But she had no time to consider it: another soldier approached and swung his sword down right for Gwendolyn's face. She had no time to react; she braced herself, raising her hands for imminent death.

At the last second there came a great clang; she opened her eyes to see Steffen beside her, blocking the blow with his sword, only a few inches to spare, struggling mightily to keep it from her. Gwendolyn rolled out of the way, grabbed a loose shield, spun around and smashed the soldier in the side of the head. Steffen then kicked him, leapt to his feet, and stabbed the man in the throat.

Gwen turned and saw a soldier raise a spear and bring it down for Steffen's back. She dove forward and pushed Steffen out of the way, saving him, then watched in horror, helpless, as the spear came down for her instead.

There came the sound of cutting wood, and Gwen looked up to see Godfrey standing over her, sword in hand, having just slashed the attacker's spear before it could reach her.

Godfrey stood there, looking amazed at what he had just done. The soldier turned to him, drew a short sword, and was about to stab him. Godfrey stood there, dazed, not quick enough to react.

Before the soldier could complete his attack, he screamed out and stumbled forward; behind him stood Kendrick, who had just pierced him in the back with a spear.

Steffen turned, realizing what had just happened, and looked at Gwendolyn.

"Now I owe *you,* my lady."

There came another great crash, the walls shaking, louder than any she had heard—followed by a huge cheer amongst the Empire.

Gwendolyn looked down to see, with terror, that the outer gate had been breached. So soon, despite all their defenses, it had given way.

Hundreds and hundreds of Empire soldiers were dead—but it hadn't even put a dent in their forces. She looked out at the horizon and saw the hordes of the world before them—and more pouring in every second. Below them, with a shout, dozens of Empire soldiers began to rush through the gates.

"Retreat to the inner wall!" Gwen screamed.

Her orders were repeated up and down the ranks, and her men retreated across the narrow wooden skywalks, fifty feet in the air, to the inner wall.

As they all reached the inner wall, they turned, and as instructed, smashed the wooden skywalks behind them, causing all the Empire soldiers pursuing them to fall crashing down to their deaths below.

The Empire soldiers who had managed to climb the walls were now stranded on the first row of parapets, unable to pursue. They were stuck. It had worked, exactly as they had practiced.

Down below, Empire soldiers were pouring through, rushing for the inner gate, the city's final line of defense. But in their haste they didn't look carefully enough at the ground; if they had, they would have seen that it was a trap, a false covering, beneath which was a moat filled with water.

They all fell and splashed down, into the water, flailing.

Yet even this couldn't stop them: more and more Empire soldiers, driven relentlessly, forward, poured in, stepping mercilessly on the heads of their fellow soldiers in the water, crushing them and drowning them beneath the water, and not caring. Unlike most commanders, Andronicus wouldn't stop to take the time to build a bridge: he would use his own human sacrifice to build his bridge.

Unfortunately, it began to work. The bodies created a human bridge that the rest of the soldiers could run across.

"ARCHERS!" Kendrick screamed.

Dozens of Silesians prepared their bows with arrows, lit by their attendants. Gwen looked down at the slick film of oil they had prepared on the waters, and prayed that this worked.

"FIRE!" Kendrick screamed.

They shot the flaming arrows into the waters and as they did a great flame spread across the surface of the water. Shrieking arose, along with the awful smell of burning flesh, as the men below were burned alive.

There appeared to be at least a thousand men dead, piled up between the walls. It would have been enough to stop any other army, to end any other siege.

But this was not any other army.

Andronicus's men were limitless, and were as indispensable as dogs. Unbelievingly, more and more men poured in. They kept charging, with no regard for their own lives, right into the flames, right past the burning bodies.

When these men died, even more men charged.

The soldiers bodies put out the flames, and soon there was no other way to stop them. Gwendolyn's men fired down everything they had left. But as another hour went by, they depleted almost all of their munitions.

And still, Andronicus's men kept coming.

The Empire finally rolled forward another battering ram, right over their own bodies, and with a great heave, they smashed it against the inner iron gate.

The entire wall shook, and Gwendolyn stumbled and fell. Beneath

her, the gate was already halfway off its hinges.

Before Gwen and her men could regroup, the ram smashed it again—and with a great crash, it smashed open the inner gate.

A cheer arose among Andronicus' men, as moments later, they all came pouring into the inner court.

Gwen and her men exchanged a horrified glance. His men were inside.

Now, there was nothing left to stop them.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Thor walked hand-in-hand with the woman in white robes, being led across the small island, trance-like. Beside him, his Legion brothers were led by others. They passed through a low, arched doorway and into a round, white building in the center of the island, and as Thor came out the other side, he was in a circular, open-air courtyard, covered in grass, and planted with an exotic fruit orchard. He tried to process what was going on, but he was not in his right mind. He wanted to resist, but as the woman led him, he was helpless at her touch, at the feel of her skin, the smell of her hair. It was intoxicating.

Most of all, it was the sound of that music—it never stopped, ringing in his ears, luring him in—it would have made him do anything she wanted. Some dim part of him knew he shouldn't be here, knew he should be thinking only of Gwendolyn. Of home. Of his mission. Of a million other things—of anything but this place. Of this woman.

But try as he did, he could not gain control of his mind. The music drowned out all thoughts.

The woman led him to a hammock and laid him down gently on it. He leaned back and, rocking ever so slightly, he looked up and saw the long, narrow leaves of a fruit tree, swaying in the wind. Beyond that, he saw the sky, clouds drifting slowly by.

Thor felt himself relaxing, so deeply, he didn't feel as if he could ever get up again.

"You are a great and brave warrior," the woman whispered, kneeling down beside him, running her soft palms through his hair, over his eyes. The sound of her voice electrified him. As her skin touched his eyelids, they felt heavy, closing on him.

"Who are you?" he managed to ask, his voice hoarse.

"I am everyone and no one," she answered. "I am your greatest fantasy—and your worst nightmare."

At her final words, Thor felt a sense of alarm. A part of him urged him to break free from this place, from this woman's grip, while he still had the chance.

But he was too entranced: he could not get his body to follow his mind, which was overcome by thoughts of her.

As she finished speaking, Thor felt thick twine begin to wrap around him, again and again; it wrapped around his shoulders, then his arms, his torso, his legs, securing him to the hammock as if he were a fish hauled in from sea. He opened his eyes and saw that he was completely bound, from head to toe, unable to move even if he wanted to.

The woman stood over him and looked down, smiling; Thor, confused, looked around and saw all of his brothers were bound in hammocks, too.

"Brave warrior," she whispered down to him. "Your days are over. Now you will be food for a feast. A feast for us."

A bonfire rose up in the center of the courtyard, and two female attendants appeared from a side door, carrying a man Thor did not recognize, bound with twine. The man was held between two long sticks, and the attendants carried him ever closer to the flames.

"No, please don't!" the man shrieked, eyes wide in terror.

The attendants continued carrying him, screaming, until they hoisted him and placed him over the flames, propping his stick on spikes as if he were an animal. He screeched as they turned him slowly, again and again, roasting him over the fire.

Thor tried to look away, but he could not.

After several minutes, after the screaming stopped, finally they pulled him out, completely blackened, and he was carted away and laid out on a huge, marble serving table.

"I think we shall roast this one next," one of the women said, gesturing to Thor.

Two more attendants, carrying a new pole, walked towards Thor and lowered it, preparing to bind him.

Krohn, lurking in the shadows, suddenly leapt forward, snarling, and sank his fangs into one of the attendant's throats. She went down screaming, and Krohn pinned her down, standing on all fours on her chest, and would not let go until she stopped moving.

Krohn then turned and pounced on the other attendant, who tried to run. He sank his fangs into her calf, downing her, then pounced on the back of her throat, clamping his jaws and killing her.

One of the women took a burning hot spear and jabbed it at Krohn. He yelped as it hit his rear right leg, leaving a nasty burn mark on his thigh. But he then turned and leapt in the air, and bit off the woman's hand; she shrieked as she dropped the spear down to the ground.

The other women converged around Krohn, who stood before Thor, not letting anyone get close, snarling as the women approached with spears, all of them jabbing Krohn.

"Krohn, over here!" yelled Indra.

Krohn turned and took off, racing around the circular courtyard, dodging the spears, and running to Indra, who laid stretched out, bound by her ankles and wrists.

"Krohn, tear the ropes!" she screamed.

Krohn understood. He pounced on the ropes, sinking his fangs into them and shaking them violently until they severed.

“Now fetch me that knife!” Indra yelled, looking nervously over her shoulder as the other women began to bear down on her.

Krohn seemed to understand: he bounded over to a large dagger sitting on a table, grabbed it in his jaws, then ran back to Indra. She snatched it from his hand, reached over and cut the ropes binding her feet.

Indra rolled out of the way just as the first woman jabbed at her with a spear, then rolled back around and stabbed her in the throat.

The woman collapsed, wide-eyed, dead.

“I’m not a man,” Indra sneered down. “And I don’t like music.”

The other women, charging, suddenly hesitated, seeing who they were up against. Indra didn’t pause: she jumped forward, snatched a spear from one of the women’s hands, and spun it around and sliced her throat.

She then lunged forward and stabbed another woman in the gut.

Not wanting to waste any more of her precious energy on a confrontation with these women, Indra turned, sprinted across the courtyard, and went right for Thor, Krohn at her side. As she reached him, she saw his eyes were glazed over, that he was still in a trance.

Indra quickly sliced all the ropes binding him, then sliced the rope of his hammock, and he fell and hit the ground with a thud. He looked up at her, his eyes still glazed.

“Thor, listen to me,” she said. “You’re in a trance. Do you understand? You have to snap out of it! You have to save the others and yourself before it’s too late. Please. For my sake. Come back to me!”

Krohn leaned forward and licked Thor’s face again and again.

Somewhere deep inside of Thor, a part of him began to stir. He began to realize that he was lost, deep in another realm. Slowly, the music of the sirens began to fade in his head, and the face of the woman before him came into focus.

Indra…the slave girl…she was speaking to him…telling him something…telling him to get up…to go…to go now!

Thor shook his head and jumped to his feet. Suddenly, he was free of the spell.

Thor felt a tingling rise within him, rising up from his toes through the tips of his fingers, felt himself overcome by a rush of heat.

As the first of the women reached him, charging with a spear, Thor sidestepped, snatched it from her hands, took the shaft, and butted her in the head with the wooden end, knocking her down.

He then spun around and used the spear as a staff, knocking the spears from the hands of the other women, then spinning around again and knocking them down. He didn’t want to kill any of them—he just wanted to stop them, and to rescue his friends.

“Free the others!” Thor yelled to Indra.

Thor and Indra split up, Krohn running by Thor’s side, as they went from one legion member to the next, slicing their ropes, freeing them. They all remained in a trance, but as Thor knocked out more of the women, slowly the spell lifted. The boys finally became suggestible enough to at least obey Thor’s command.

“Follow me!” Thor yelled to each of them.

Thor, Indra and Krohn ran with the others, leading them as they all crossed the small island, back to their boat.

They all jumped in, and Thor reached out with the tip of the spear and shoved off hard from shore, Indra doing the same beside him.

The other boys, all finally snapping out of it, began to paddle with all they had, fighting the tide as they pulled away slowly from the island.

The women left on the island ran to the shore, to the water’s edge, and watched them go; distraught, they began shrieking and tearing out their hair. Their screams, even more awful than the sound of their music, echoed off the waters, haunting Thor as the tide finally picked up and carried them away.

* * *

Thor was sullen as he paddled silently with the others. A somber feeling had permeated the boat, as they paddled for hours, putting more and more distance between themselves and that island. They passed by ever-shifting terrain, and Thor could not help but contemplate how close they had come to being killed. He still didn’t entirely understand what had happened back there.

After they had left that place, for the first several hours they had all been riding on adrenaline, their fear and excitement propelling them to keep the boat moving. But now, as the second sun grew long, the excitement was wearing off, and Thor and the others were feeling drained in the pervasive silence which had fallen over them. Thor’s shoulders were growing tired and his back stiff, as he wondered if this paddling would ever end.

“How long shall we keep going on like this?” O’Connor finally asked aloud the question that had been on all of their minds, putting down his paddle and wiping the back of his head. “It is useless. We are not getting anywhere.”

“And we don’t even know where we’re going,” Elden added, in equal frustration.

“Yes we do,” Drake said defensively, hoisting the map.

“You and your stupid map,” Conval said. “The map of a thief. How do you even know it’s accurate?”

“It almost got us killed back there,” Conven said.

“We should have listened to Indra from the start,” Elden said.

“Yes, you should have,” Indra said. “We are going in wrong direction. I told you that.”

“This slave girl doesn’t know what she’s talking about,” Durs snapped. “The map is very clear.”

“Don’t you call her that again,” Elden snapped, turning to Durs, reddening. “Indra saved all of our lives back there, lest you forget.”

Durs fell silent, and it was the first time Thor had ever seen him back down to anyone. Then again, Elden was bigger and broader, despite his age, and it didn’t appear that Durs wanted a confrontation. Elden was also more heated than Thor had ever seen, and in that moment, Thor could tell that Elden had really fallen for her.

“The point is,” Dross said, “we know where they are taking the Sword. This map leads us there. And this channel of water is the only way. We just have to stick to the course.”

“I will tell you where these waters take us,” Indra said darkly. “These waters will bring us to the Land of the Undead. An evil and uninviting land; a place of the deepest gloom and death. Those who enter never come out. Ever. That is for certain. Haven’t you noticed the tides?” she asked, looking down. “They have grown stronger. They pull us in one direction: to the great waterfall. Once we go down it, there is no turning back. This is your last chance: turn back now.”

They looked at each other with apprehension.

“And go where?” Reece asked.

“Back to where we began,” she replied.

There came a collective groan from the three brothers.

“All the way back to the beginning?” Dross asked.

“So you would have us fight these tides, all the way back, start over again, without a map, without anything to go on except for your word?” Drake asked.

“And who’s to say you don’t have an agenda of your own?” Durs added. “You are not one of us. Are we to put our lives into the hand of a wild slave girl, a professed thief?”

“You already have,” Indra remarked, “and you came out alive.”

“I would trust her with my life before I would you,” Elden said, sneering back at Durs.

The group fell into a tense silence.

Drake sighed.

“So then what would you have us do?” Drake asked, turning to Thor. “Since you are leader of this mission. Would you have us all start again, follow this slave girl’s word, this stranger who we don’t

even know, and ignore this map from the Ring?"

Thor sat there, feeling all the eyes on him, and debated. Some part of him, deep down, felt as if something was not right with where they were going. But at the same time, he wasn't getting a clear feeling. Something was obscured. He did not know why—and that frightened him. He did not know for sure that going back was the best route. And even if they wanted to, the currents had become too strong, and they were all too tired. He didn't see how that was even a possibility. At least the three brothers had a map, a destination, a plan. Plus, they couldn't risk losing more valuable time in searching for the Sword.

"We'll give your map a chance," Thor said to them. "Until tomorrow. If we don't have progress by then, some concrete lead, then we will turn back around and follow Indra's way."

Everyone nodded, seeming content, and they all went back to paddling.

"Assuming we all live to see tomorrow," Indra said ominously, as they all fell back into silence, the only sound in the world that of the lapping of the water beneath their oars.

* * *

They paddled so long that Thor felt his arms would fall off his body. The second sun sank low in the sky, and just as Thor felt he couldn't lift the paddle one more time, the wide body of water shrank into a narrow channel. Land came into view on either side of them—a vast, desolate land made of a black, craggy soil, stretching as far as the eye could see. It looked like endless fields of upturned dirt, and it felt as if they had come to a place where nothing lived—as if they had come to the very end of the earth.

"The Wastelands," Indra said softly, ominously. "The falls aren't far now."

Thor began to hear the distant sound of running water, growing stronger, as the current, too, grew stronger, pulling them down what was becoming a river. Soon they all lifted their paddles, no longer needing to use them, as the water carried them its way.

There came a bend in the river, and as they turned, the sound of rushing water grew louder; Thor's heart sank as in the distance he spied foaming water, a drop-off. He could begin to feel the spray, the moisture in the air, even from here. Indra was right: waterfalls.

They all looked at each other ominously.

"Looks like you're wrong again," Reece said, turning to Drake.

"You better be right about this map," Elden said threateningly.

“Those falls will kill us!” O’Connor cried.

“How deep is the drop?” Conval asked.

Now they all looked to Indra for answers.

“I don’t know,” she answered. “But if we survive it, I assure you, the falls will be the least of our problems.”

The current became too fast, the noise and the spray stronger, and Thor and the others clutched the sides of the boat firmly.

“We have to turn around!” Conven said, trying to back-paddle..

“It’s too late!” Thor yelled. “The current is too strong! Brace yourselves!”

The boat rushed downstream, faster and faster, and Thor’s eyes opened wide as the falls came into view. It was a wall of white water, gushing down. Beside Thor, Krohn started to whine, and Thor reached around with one arm and held him tight.

“It’s okay, Krohn,” he said. “Just stay close. And if you fall in the water, swim back to us.”

Krohn whined again, as if in response, and a moment later, Thor’s stomach began to drop as their boat was beginning to tip over the edge.

Thor looked down over the edge and saw a tremendous drop, at least fifty feet. It was a wall of white water, and there was no time left to react.

The boat went over the edge and as one they all screamed, plummeting straight down through the air.

Thor found himself immersed in a wall of water, falling from the boat, flying through the air, flailing. He became lost in a world of rushing water, as he was flipped end over end, water washing all over him.

He plunged beneath the water for he did not know how long. His lungs were bursting as water shot up his nose, tumbling end over end, his face stung by the impact of the fall.

When he was finally sure his lungs were going to burst, the water cast him up; he emerged, flailing, taking huge breaths, somewhere downriver. He was disoriented, water in his eyes and ears and nose, and as he struggled to open his eyes amidst the roaring, gushing current, all he saw was more water.

The current sucked him down, submerging him again and again, until finally it began to slow, and he surfaced, several seconds later, gasping for air and able to stay afloat.

Thor treaded water, looking all around for his friends. One by one they began to surface, bobbing their heads, gasping for air, flailing, as the current carried them downstream. Thor also spotted Indra pop up, Elden swimming over and grabbing her. Thor looked everywhere, frantic, for Krohn, but could not find him.

“KROHN!” Thor screamed.

He turned every which way, and for a moment, far downstream, he saw his head surface, then go under again. He saw a look of fear in Krohn’s face which he had never seen before; it was a look of helplessness.

Their boat surfaced not too far from them, beaten up but somehow still intact, and all the Legion began to swim for it. But Thor swam off by himself in the other direction, heading for where he had last spotted Krohn.

“Swim for the boat!” Reece yelled to him.

But Thor ignored him; he had to get to Krohn, especially as he was about to enter a section of the current which would force him off in a different direction.

“Get back!” O’Connor screamed. “Don’t go that way!”

But Thor swam with all he had, fighting the current.

“KROHN!” he screamed again.

Images flashed through Thor’s mind of the time he had first found Krohn, of his being a tiny pup, of the bond that they had. The thought of losing him pained Thor beyond what he could imagine.

Suddenly, Thor saw one of Krohn’s paws surface, before going down again. Thor dove down, beneath the water, and swam; as he opened his eyes beneath the surface of the crystal-blue waters, he spotted Krohn, sinking towards the bottom.

Thor dove deeper, his ears bursting from the pressure, then grabbed Krohn and swam to the surface, dragging him.

As they surfaced, Thor took a deep breath and Krohn did, too. Krohn whimpered, treading water against the current, and Thor turned and kicked, trying with all he had to distance them from the fork. He wasn’t making as much headway as he would have liked.

Thor felt a hand on his arm and looked over to see Reece; he kicked, and together they made headway, fighting the current and making it towards the boat.

As they reached it, Thor hoisted Krohn up on board; he stood on all fours, grateful to be out of the water, and shook like crazy, then coughed out water, again and again. Thor and Reece held onto the rim of the boat and it carried them both downstream.

Thor turned and looked back, up at the falls; from here, they looked impossibly high, like a mountain. He could not believe they had survived the fall. They were just lucky there were no rocks at the bottom, and that at its base was a deep pool of water.

As they hung on, floating quickly, Thor and Reece turned to each other at the same time, still dazed, and suddenly burst out laughing.

“We survived, old friend,” Reece said, unbelieving.

Thor shook his head.

“Somehow, we did,” he answered.

Thor and Reece pulled themselves back up onto the boat, and as the current took them all downstream, they spotted their paddle floating in the water. They directed the boat over to them and each reached down and snatched them up. Thor was finally beginning to feel a sense of control again.

As the river bend turned, though, Thor’s relief turned to anxiety. A whole new land spread out before them, and Thor realized immediately that everything Indra had warned of had been true. He realized they had made a big mistake in coming here.

The underworld was the darkest, most desolate and gloomy land Thor had ever seen. The river cut through its countryside, comprised of a volcanic, black dirt, in which there grew endless fields of stubby, black trees, leafless, their dead branches twisted into ominous shapes, covered in thorns. It looked like a forest that had been burned and never grew back, and it felt as if nothing had ever lived here to begin with. Nothing good, anyway.

Even the sky here had a pallor of gloom unlike any Thor had ever seen. A dark grey had replaced the bright blue, and black clouds rolled amidst it, threatening a storm. The sun, too, hung lower, and a gloomy twilight replaced the afternoon light. Thor felt as if they had left afternoon and arrived in twilight, as if they were being carried into a land where despair ruled.

There arose strange noises all around them, like a bird’s song mixed with a wail, and Thor looked over and spotted flocks of enormous blackbirds perched on the branches. They resembled ravens but were four times the size, and they had eyes in their heads and on their chests. Instead of wings they had claws, and they shook these furiously as they leaned back and stuck out their chests, creating the strange noises.

They all watched the boat as it went, and Thor felt as if any moment the whole flock might pounce on them. In some ways, having their creepy eyes watch their every move was worse.

Beside him, Krohn snarled.

“And what of your map now?” Elden asked the three brothers derisively.

The three brothers all sat in the rear of the boat, and now they all look shell-shocked, unsure of themselves.

“I still have it,” Drake said, holding it up. “It’s wet, but it reads. I held onto it with my life.”

“Why did your map make no mention of the falls?” Reece pressed.

“It’s not a topographical map,” Drake sneered. “It’s drawn by a prisoner to point us to the Sword.”

“Or to our deaths,” O’Connor said.

“Did you ever consider it could be a trap?” Conven asked.

“I think someone is playing us all for a fool,” Conval added.

“So what do you propose we do now?” Durs said back. “Turn back and climb those falls and start again?”

They all glanced back, and knew that was an impossibility.

“We have no choice,” Dross said. “We stick to the map.”

The boat settled back into a gloomy silence.

“It seems everything you’ve said has been right so far,” Thor said to Indra. “Tell us more about this underworld we travel in.”

Indra looked about warily; she did not look happy to be here. She was silent for a long time before she spoke.

“It is fabled to be one of the seven realms of hell,” she said, staring out at the gloomy landscape. “Legend has it that when hell had no more room, the Devils were given six more realms. It was forged during the early days of the Empire. Before Andronicus—before even his ancestors. It is a place where even Empire troops will not go.

“This river that cuts through it connects two different Empire lands. It is a shortcut of sorts. Yet no one is foolish enough to actually use it. People will take the long way, however long it takes.”

They fell back into silence as they all paddled on the twisting, narrow river, as the sky fell into a deeper twilight. It was like paddling into somebody’s nightmare.

There came a sudden splashing, and Thor looked over and saw a set of glowing eyes surface from the water—then disappear.

“Did you see that?” O’Connor asked.

They all examined the water, as all around them it became filled with small splashing noises, and sets of glowing yellow eyes popped up everywhere.

As Thor leaned down to get a better look, suddenly a reptile jumped up from the water, the size of a large fish, with huge glowing eyes, and long, crocodile like jaws. The jaws must have been two feet long, and it snapped right at Thor.

Thor leaned back, at the last second, just before the jaws cut him in half.

Krohn snarled at the creature, but then pulled back himself as another one of these creatures leapt out of the air and snapped at him. Thor lifted his paddle and smashed the reptiles as they leapt out of the water all around them. The others did the same, beating them back, as they circled the boat.

One of them leapt into the air and managed to sink its teeth into Conval’s arm.

“Get it off!” he shrieked, clawing at it.

Conven hurried over, grabbed its jaws and managed to pry them off his twin brother’s arm, then threw the thing back into the water.

Luckily he got it off quickly enough to leave his brother with only a minor wound.

"There's thousands of these things!" O'Connor yelled out, as he dodged one which leapt through the air right past him. "We can't hold them back forever!"

Thor realized he was right; they were overwhelmed by these creatures and it was only a matter of time until they did some serious damage; there was no way they could fend them all off. It was as if they had navigated into a den of piranhas.

But then all of the creatures suddenly turned and took off, submerging underwater and darting away at full speed.

"What are they doing?" Elden asked.

"It looks like they're running from us," O'Connor said.

"Or from something else," Indra said ominously.

Thor realized, with a pit in his stomach, that she was right. All of those creatures wouldn't dart away like that unless they were scared, unless they were running from something. Something much bigger than they.

Suddenly, there came a huge rush of water, and as Thor looked down, he saw the waters foaming, bubbling.

He knew something was about to attack them. Something big.

"Brace yourself!" he screamed.

Before them came an explosion of water, and bursting up from beneath the surface came a massive sea monster. It was unlike anything Thor had ever lain eyes upon. It was a huge, whale-like creature, its jaws twenty feet long, filled with rows of razor-sharp teeth. Its red eyes protruded from the side of its head, several feet wide, and its nose curved upward, several feet, with razors on the end of it.

Its open jaws came down for the boat, and Thor's reflexes kicked in. Without thinking, he placed a stone in his sling, leaned back, and hurled it with all he had, aiming for the monster's nose. Thor remembered hearing that the nose was the most sensitive place to wound a beast, and he prayed with all he had that it was true. If not, within seconds, they would all be inside the beast's stomach.

It was a perfect strike, at full force, and as the rock hit, the beast suddenly stopped, halfway down, and leaned back and roared.

It was an earth-shattering roar, loud enough to shake the waters and rock their boat; Thor barely kept his footing as he reached up to grab his ears.

The monster surfaced even higher, raising up another thirty feet, revealing rows of claws extending along the side of its body, tapering to a point, looking like a whale crossed with a sea snake.

All the Legion broke into action, inspired by Thor, hurling spears

at the beast, all lodging into its body; Elden threw an axe, lodging into its head, and O'Connor managed to fire off three arrows, all landing with precision in one eye.

But, to Thor's shock, the beast remained unfazed. It simply pulled them all out as if they were toothpicks using its various claws, then threw them into the water.

The beast, even angrier, threw back its head, opened its jaws twice as wide, and brought them down again, preparing to slice them all in half.

This time, there was nothing left to stop them.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

As Gwendolyn watched the Empire break down the gates below and pour into Silesia, she stood there frozen. She could hardly believe it had come to this so quickly. All of their carefully-laid plans for defense, washed away in a matter of hours.

"My lady, we must move!" Steffen yelled beside her, frantic, tugging on her arm.

She snapped out of it, her instincts kicking in. She saw Srog, Brom, Kolk, Kendrick, Godfrey and the others all retreating with the soldiers down the back steps of the parapets, and she remembered their contingency plan. She had gone over the plan endlessly with her generals, and now it was surreal to see it put into motion.

As the first Empire soldiers rushed through the gates, Srog turned to his men and screamed:

"NOW!"

Several soldiers pulled huge levers from up above, and as they did, a trap door opened up in the ground below, right past the gate, making all the soldiers fall, dozens of Empire men, screaming, into a deep and dark pit. The massive hole prevented the soldiers from getting any farther past the gates, into Silesia. It bought Gwen and the others precious time—but Gwen knew it wouldn't hold them back for long, and they all continued with their controlled retreat.

The Empire men were beginning to catch on, and they stopped racing into the city, stopping at the gates, right before the pit. Yet they were log jammed, with nowhere to go; unable to back up, their own men stampeded them, rushing to enter the city, and pushed more and more men, screaming, into the pit.

When the tide of men finally stopped, they began to turn back around, press their way out of the gates, and look for other ways into the city.

It bought Gwen and her people the time they needed to retreat. Gwen was pleased to see this plan working—it had been a finishing touch that she had added to the war plans. It allowed them time to marshal the citizens, to gather the old men and women, the children and usher them from their homes and through the arched gates leading down to the lower city. To save time in the descent, Gwen had had iron poles installed up and down the walls, and dozens of citizens at a time grabbed and slid their way down the mountain, landing on the lower levels in an orderly fashion.

The plan worked like clockwork, and within a matter of minutes, all of the Silesians of the upper city were safely past the second set of city gates, and descending down to the lower levels. Gwen stood

outside the gates, waiting for the last person to exit, making sure no one was left behind, Steffen and Kendrick standing loyally by her side. Finally, assured everyone was gone, she passed through, and as she did, four rows of heavy iron spiked gates came down behind her, one after the other. It would not be easy to penetrate, especially as they were embedded in stone walls a dozen feet thick.

Gwen joined the soldiers on next line of defense, the upper parapets, behind the bars, at the Canyon's edge. She took up a position beside Steffen, Kendrick, Godfrey, Srog and the others. Hundreds of Silesian archers knelt there, waiting to hold this final line of defense.

Down below, Gwen could already see the first of the Empire troops scaling the walls into the courtyard, lowering ropes and ladders for the others to follow. Within moments, dozens followed, already charging right for them, towards the second set of iron gates. But only so many men could filter through at a time, given that they could not charge through on foot, their way blocked by the huge pit before the gates.

Kendrick knelt beside her, holding his own bow, waiting.

"NOT YET!" he called to his men, all awaiting his command.

The men got closer and closer, and the air filled with tension.

"FIRE!" Kendrick screamed, standing with his bow.

Hundreds of Silesian soldiers stood with him, among them Godfrey, Steffen, Srog, Brom, Kolk—and even Gwendolyn—and a hail of arrows fell from the sky, stopping dozens of Empire soldiers in their tracks.

The archers immediately restrung and fired again. And again.

They managed to take out the first round of men, to keep the courtyard empty of them, filling the ground with their bodies. The Empire had been caught off guard, unprepared for a counterattack after they had breached the gates.

But no matter how many they killed, the Empire soldiers kept coming. Soon, on their heels, there arrived a discipline squad of archers, who took a knee, raised shields in unison to block the hail of arrows, then fired back.

Gwen ducked as the sky filled with arrows heading their way. One sailed by her head, just missing.

Some of the other Silesians were not as fast as she, and a few of them screamed out, wounded, and collapsed over the stone wall, hurling down, dead.

Gwen stood and fired again, and was surprised to see she actually hit one, in the throat. She felt a hand pull her down as an arrow flew by her ear. It was Steffen, beside her.

"There are advantages to being short, my lady," he said. "You do

not have these. Follow me and stay low."

Steffen peaked over the edge, leaned over with his bow and fired three quick shots, taking out three soldiers nearing the gate.

"You do not need to be tall to kill a man," he said to her. "If there's one thing I've learned in my life, it is this."

The fighting went on for round after round, arrows flying incessantly, screaming erupting from both sides as bodies mounted. Empire bodies piled up in the courtyard as hours passed.

Still, more and more Empire troops scaled the walls like ants. The only saving grace for the Silesians was that the Empire was trickling in, unable to charge over the pit at the gate.

And then, everything changed. Gwen watched with horror as a squadron of Empire soldiers appeared with long wooden planks and laid them down over the pit at the entrance. One by one they covered it up, and soon, they managed to cover it completely, building a bridge. They didn't try to rescue their soldiers trapped below; instead, to save time, they smothered them, building a bridge over their heads.

With the makeshift bridge laid, hundreds of Empire soldiers rushed into the inner courtyard, at a dizzying pace. They all let out a battle cry, charging for the gates.

Gwendolyn's heart dropped. Her men were running out of arrows, their ranks dwindling, and she knew their time was numbered. They couldn't continue to hold the line, to hold back this many men for long.

The Empire soldiers parted ways as a huge iron battering ram was wheeled forward by two dozen men. They charged forward and slammed it into the iron gate with a crash. The ground shook beneath Gwen as the metal bent.

These four iron gates, which seemed indefensible, were already proving vulnerable.

"CAULDRONS!" Kendrick screamed.

Silesian soldiers rushed forward, and as one they poured huge cauldrons of molten tar over the edge.

Screams arose from below as dozens of Empire soldiers were doused in the thick liquid.

"ARCHERS!" Kendrick screamed.

The archers stepped forward, this time armed with flaming arrows, and fired down at the soldiers doused in tar, setting them on fire.

Screams filled the courtyard as the flames spread, and dozens more died. Bodies piled high at the gates. It would have been enough to stop any other army.

But not Andronicus.

The Empire troops kept coming. And coming. There was no end

to them.

Gwen watched in horror as the battering ram was taken up by others, who rammed the first gate so hard that they knocked it off its hinges. The Empire troops erupted in a cheer. Only three gates to go.

"My lady, we're nearly out of tar and—" Srog reported urgently.

Before he could finish there came another crash, so strong it sent Gwendolyn stumbling back; she peered down to see they took out the second iron gate.

"It's time to retreat to the lower city!" Srog said.

Gwen realized he was right. She nodded, and without hesitation Srog called out: "RETREAT!"

Gwen's soldiers turned and gave up their posts, sprinting down the back staircases from the rear wall.

Gwen joined the others in hurrying down the stone steps, descending flight after flight, passing dozens of soldiers standing guard on her way down, all taking positions at every level. There came another great crash, and Gwen looked over her shoulder, and with a pit in her stomach, watched the third iron gate give way.

As soon as Gwen and the others cleared the lower levels, they reached up and turned huge cranks; as they did, it raised a minefield of iron spikes, shooting straight up into the air, covering the lower city like a shield. As the Empire crashed through the fourth and final gate with a cheer, they raced forward through the arched gate, expecting to attack.

But there was nowhere for them to go. The lower city was protected from above by a field of iron spikes. A few soldiers could not stop in time, and they kept charging, and fell through the air, impaling themselves on the spikes, dangling in the air, their blood dripping down.

Finally, the Empire troops stopped, and stood at the very edge of the Canyon, looking down at the spikes below and realizing there was no way down to the lower city without going through them.

Gwendolyn looked up, and saw that finally, the Empire could not proceed. Finally, they were safe.

As Gwen reached the lower levels of the city, she was greeted by dozens of her generals, all anxiously awaiting her. The citizens milled about, an agitated buzz in the air.

"We are safe down here, my lady," Srog said. "There is no way for them to get through."

"Yes but for how long?" Kendrick asked, as they all convened, surrounded by their troops.

"As long as we need to," he replied.

"As long as we don't run out of food and supplies," Brom added ominously.

“How long can we survive done here, without provisions?” Kolk asked.

Srog shook his head.

“It has never been tested. Maybe a week. Maybe two.”

“And then what?” asked Kendrick.

Slowly, Srog shook his head.

“At least we are safe from their reach,” he said.

“But we are not safe from hunger,” Gwendolyn added.

Gwendolyn looked up with the others, saw the faces of the Empire soldiers, looking down, and knew that, sooner or later, they would find a way to get down here. And now, backed into a corner, they had nowhere left to run.

Eventually, they would have to face them—or die.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Thor stood on the boat with the others, the sea monster looming over them, and braced himself to die.

He closed his eyes and prayed to God with all he had.

Please God, give me the power to stop this beast.

Thor thought of Argon's words.

Do not try to overpower nature. Become one with it. Harness nature's power. After all, you, too, are a part of nature.

Thor felt a tremendous heat overwhelm his body, rise up from his feet through his legs, through his torso, through his hands, and into the palms of his hand.

He opened his eyes and raised his palms, aiming them at the beast as it descended with open jaws, about to kill them all.

To Thor's shock, an orb of light emanated from his palms and shot up through the air, landing inside the beast's mouth.

The beast went flying back, clear out of the water and onto the shore, a good thirty feet away. It squirmed and flapped on the soil, screaming out, its claws flailing in every direction.

After nearly a minute of thrashing, the beast lay on its side, dead.

The others all turned and looked at Thor in the silence that followed. He wished he had an answer for them; he wished he understood where his powers came from, understood how to harness them perfectly on demand. And most of all he wished he knew who he was.

But he did not.

He was different from everyone else, he knew. But how?

Would he ever know?

* * *

The slow-moving river tide carried them farther downriver, deeper into the heart of the underworld. They all paddled with all they had, trying to put as much distance between themselves and the monster as the sky grew increasingly dark. Thor still stood there, at the back of the boat, trying to understand what had just happened. It was like another part of himself, one he could not quite reach. It had taken him a while to come back to where he was.

"I know of you," Indra said, looking over at him with something like fear and awe. "You are the son of the Druid. The Chosen One. I have heard tales about you. Great tales."

Thor blinked at her, confused.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “You couldn’t have heard anything about me. I’m from a small village inside the Ring. I am just another Legion member.”

Indra shook her head, adamantly.

“We have legends, our people. Ancient legends. They tell of the day the Chosen One will arrive to lead. They say he will carry with him balls of flame and light, a power unlike any we have seen. The son of a Druid. He will come at a time of great calamity in the world, a great battle between light and darkness. A man who stands between two worlds. Our last hope.”

Thor looked at her, not sure if she understood what she was talking about. He assumed she was confused, mistaking him with someone else.

“I believe you have me confused,” he said. “I am not one of your legends,” he added, finally sitting back down and paddling with the others.

“I confuse you with no one,” she said defiantly. “I know what the legends say. And I know now who you are.”

The others stopped and turned, staring at Thor, and Thor shook his head.

“I’m just a boy,” Thor insisted. “Just like everybody else.”

It was all he wanted. To be just like everybody else. Not to be looked at as different.

Indra shook her head, continuing to stare at him as if he were an alien who had jumped down from the sky. She made a strange sign with her hand over her throat and chest and head, almost as if she were praying to Thor. Or protecting herself from him.

She bowed her head, then turned back towards the water.

Thor felt a chill, and hardly knew what to make of it. It was the first time anyone had looked at him that way. As if he were a God.

The tide grew strong and the night thick, and Thor looked around at the current with a new respect for what creatures might be lurking beneath. Up ahead there came a small mountain, into which the river continued running, its tide flowing into a small, black tunnel in the stone.

“The Cave of Devils,” Indra hissed, fear in her voice.

Everyone looked to her now with a new sense of respect.

“That doesn’t sound very hospitable,” O’Connor said.

Indra shook her head.

“It is a house of bones. Legend says it is where devils go to have their snacks.”

The boys all looked to each other, apprehension etched across their faces.

“Is there another way?” Reece asked, as the tide continued to pull

them strongly.

Indra shook her head.

"We could pull the boat aside and try to make on land," Elden said.

She shook her head.

"The land is worse," she said. "Do you see the soil?"

Thor turned with the others and looked out at the shore.

"It is not soil," she added. "It is a hundred million worms. Flesh-eating worms. The second you step foot on it, your foot will be no more."

Thor examined the dark soil closely—and as he did, he could see that it was indeed moving, ever so slightly. He gulped, with a new respect for this place.

"Our map says we must take the river through the cave," Dross insisted.

Indra let out a short, mocking laugh.

"Your maps says many things. But does it tell us how to stay alive?"

The tide became stronger, and soon their decision was made for them, as it sucked them right into the cave, all of them ducking their heads so as not to hit the low, stone arched entranceway. Thor's stomach dropped in dread. What was this place?

As they entered the cave, it was like entering a whole different world. At first, it was pitch black in here, the ceiling low to their heads, dead silent save for the sound of drops of water echoing, reverberating off the walls. Thor could hear his brothers breathing hard, the sound amplified, echoing, and he could sense the fear in all of them. He felt it himself. He braced himself in the blackness, expecting to be attacked any minute.

After a minute, the cave opened up, the ceiling above their head rising dozens of feet, the tide continuing to pull them slowly through. It was noisier in here, every drop of water reverberating off the high walls—and there also came another noise: a cacophony of insects and small animals. There was the fluttering of wings, strange cooing noises which Thor wished he had never heard. There came the low and high-pitched groans and moans of all sorts of odd insects, each sound more ominous than the next. It was as if they had entered a cave of horrors. And not being able to see anything just made it all worse.

Beside Thor, Krohn snarled, his hair on end. Thor turned side to side, as did the others, trying to peer into the blackness and see if he could decipher anything.

As the water carried them deeper inside, the cave walls began to take on a soft glow, to light up just a bit; Thor looked closely, wondering where the lights were coming from, and all along the walls

he spotted thousands of insects, clinging to the stone, hissing at them, their glowing green eyes opening as they passed them and casting off a light. Thor realized, with dread, that they were waking them. It was like a thousand small candles in the blackness, but at least it afforded them a light to see by.

"What are they?" Elden asked Indra, on guard, afraid they might attack.

"Cavesuckers," Indra said. "They carry the sting of a hundred bees. You need not worry: they stick to the walls. Unless you provoke them."

"How do you know if you've provoked them?" O'Connor asked.

"Their eyes will glow," she answered.

Thor gulped.

"As they are doing now?" he asked.

She nodded back.

The hissing continued, and the cavesuckers crawled along the walls, some of them arching their small heads towards the boat.

With the cave aglow, Thor could dimly make out its proportions: it was cavernous, its arched ceiling soaring dozens of feet, and they were riding down the center of a narrow river. Huge stalagmites and stalactites hung from every direction.

There came a low, soft snarling noise from somewhere in the depths of the cave, and Thor turned with the others—but saw nothing.

"I don't like the feel of this," Reece said, tightening his hand on his sword hilt.

"Nor do I," Conval said. He drew his sword, and the metallic ring echoed loudly in the cave, again and again, as if a dozen swords had been drawn.

"You shouldn't have done that," Indra scolded him. "Now you will provoke them."

"Provoke who?" Conval asked.

There began to appear from the depths of the blackness, walking towards them, dozens of shadows. They resembled human skeletons, all bones, no flesh, but their bones were black, and their eyes glowed white. They each carried a long, white sword, glistening, reflecting off the water's light. Thor could see that each sword was made of bone. It looked like human bone.

"The army of the undead," Indra answered, fear in her voice.

Thor turned slowly and saw that from every corner of the cave there emerged hundreds of these things, these undead skeletons wielding swords of bones, all heading right for them.

"Undead?" Elden asked. "Can they not be killed?"

"No," Indra replied. "They are already dead. The only ones left to be killed are us."

There came a great clatter of bones, and suddenly the undead raced towards them, raising their swords.

"Well, if we're going to die," Thor said, "it's going to be on dry ground, and with our swords held high. ATTACK!" Thor commanded.

As one, the nine Legion members jumped from the boat, onto the dry ground of the shore, Krohn leaping out with them. They all drew their swords and bravely charged the undead.

There came a great clash of weapons as sword met sword, the sounds amplified, echoing off of everything inside the cave. The Legion had trained for this, had trained to be outnumbered, had trained to be pitted against fierce warriors—and while these shadow skeletons were fierce, they were still conventional warriors, and no match for the expertise of the Legion.

Thor and the others went blow for blow with the skeletons, and as Thor's sword met one of theirs, he was happily surprised to see that his steel shattered the bone sword; he then swung around and slashed the skeleton before him, and as he did, all of its bones broke and crumpled into a heap on the ground.

Thor wheeled in every direction, blocking blows, parrying, shattering swords and slashing skeleton after skeleton, leaving heaps of bones at his feet.

All around him, his Legion brothers were doing the same, deftly defeating the warriors before them.

Krohn joined in, leaping into the fray, snarling, pouncing on one skeleton after the next, knocking them down to the ground, and leaving them in piles.

After nearly an hour fighting, the shores were lined with heaps of bones. Though Thor and his Legion brothers were bruised and scratched and breathing hard, exhausted, none were seriously injured.

They all looked at each other, regrouping, out of breath. For their first time since being in the Empire, Thor was hopeful, even optimistic. They had taken some of the worst the Empire could throw at them, and they had survived.

"We won," O'Connor said. "I can't believe it."

They all turned and walked back towards the boat—but as they did, Indra stood there, eyes still wide with fear, looking over their shoulders.

"Do not boast too soon, warrior," Indra warned.

There arose from behind them a sound that made the hairs on the back of Thor's neck rise. It was the sound of a thousand bones clattering.

Slowly, Thor turned, almost afraid to look.

There, he was horrified to see, were all the bones of the defeated skeletons, slowly beginning to rise up from the ground, and re-attach

themselves. One bone at a time, the entire army of the undead was coming back to life.

"As I said," Indra said, "you cannot kill what is already dead."

Thor watch wide-eyed as the entire army began to reassemble itself, to prepare for yet another attack. All that fighting, all of their victory—it had all been useless. These monsters would just keep regenerating themselves, until finally they tired Thor and his men out, and killed them all. They might not be as good fighters—but they had something that Thor and his men never would: endless endurance. And at the end of the day, Thor knew, endurance would always triumph.

"Back to the boat!" Thor yelled, stepping backwards slowly with the others.

As one, they all turned and jumped back into the boat and gave it a good shove from shore, paddling harder than ever. The tides picked up, and soon they were rushing downriver, gaining distance from that shore. Thor and his men ducked as they passed into yet another canal, leaving the cavernous room, just in time to be out of reach of the advancing army.

It was the first time in Thor's life that victory had been meaningless, and as they entered yet another tunnel of darkness, he wondered, with a futile feeling, what other horrors could await them around the bend.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Gwendolyn stood on the broad stone landing of the lower city of Silesia, surrounded by her generals, soldiers and Silesian citizens, all of them looking out in ominous silence into the vast expanse of the Canyon, watching the second sun drop in the sky. They had not heard a peep from the Empire's men all this time, and after a long, agitated panic among the crowd, slowly, they had settled into a deep quiet. The tension hung thick in the air, each of them lost in their own world, looking out at the sky, facing their own mortality. It was the quiet of a thousand souls in the eye of a storm, of people who knew they had nowhere left to go but to their deaths.

The silence from the Empire scared Gwendolyn more than their attack. She knew that Andronicus was up there somewhere, plotting something, and she knew it was only a matter time until he executed it. He was as ruthless a soldier as she had ever seen. The worst part was that, even if he did nothing, there would still be no way out for them but death. How long could they survive down here, until their provisions ran out? They had nowhere to go but up. And up was not an option.

Andronicus knew that, of course. He had them all by the throat. He would make them wait it out. Allow their panic to set in. He was probably reveling in it right now. He had them exactly where he wanted.

Gwen supposed she should be pleased with herself for at least fending them off as well as she had in her first battle, for taking out so many of them, and for saving so many of her people in the evacuation. But she was not pleased with herself at all. She felt she had failed.

Nearby stood Srog, Brom, Kolk and Godfrey, along with the other soldiers, and beside her stood Steffen and Kendrick. They all looked out at the Canyon, faces grim. She wished she knew what to say to them to cheer them up, wished she knew where to go from here.

"Do you remember that one time with father," Kendrick answered softly, nostalgically, looking out at the sky, "when he was trying to teach you to swing a sword? You refused. You said swords were for weak men."

Gwendolyn smiled.

"Only vaguely," she said. "I must have been very young."

Kendrick smiled.

"Father got so mad," he continued. "He ended all of our training sessions for the day. Back then, it seemed like you'd said the dumbest thing in the world."

He sighed.

“But you know, now that I’m older, I realize there was great wisdom in what you said,” he added. “The simplest battles are won by swords. The most complex ones are won by other means. By strategy. By logistics. By willpower.”

“I’m sure I was not hinting at all that when I said that as a youth,” she smiled.

He smiled back.

“No, I am sure you weren’t. What you’d said was wise beyond your years. Even then.”

He turned and looked at her.

“I just want you to know that you fought this battle brilliantly,” he said. “We killed twenty times our ranks, and lost far fewer of our own than we should have. For any other leader, that would be a victory to be remember for all time. Don’t feel badly. Their numbers were too vast for any army to conquer.”

“He’s right, my lady,” said Steffen beside her.

“Truer words were never spoken,” added Srog.

“Thank you, my brother,” she said to Kendrick. “I want you to know that I’ve always thought of you as my brother. My *true* brother. We share the same father. And that is blood enough for me.”

Kendrick looked back to her and he could see in his eyes how much her words meant to him.

“And what now, my lady?” Srog asked. “I’m afraid we have no other contingency plans beyond this. Now, the people look to you. Now, the decision is yours.”

“It would do us little good to surrender as a people to Andronicus,” Gwendolyn said. “We all know his reputation: he does not keep his prisoners alive. We must wait it out.”

“And if hunger finds us first?” Brom asked.

Gwen sighed.

“Then we fight a different kind of death,” she answered. “Unless one of you has other ideas?”

They all stood in the glum silence, listening to the howling of the wind. No one had anything to add.

Kendrick finally cleared his throat.

“When we joined the Legion,” he said, “and then the Silver, we took a vow. It was a vow to fight, even when there was no chance left to win. It was a vow of honor. A vow of glory. That is what we have achieved here today. Not victory, but glory. And sometimes, long after the victor has left, it is the glory that remains, that is sung of, not the conquest. Sometimes, glory is greater.”

As they all sat there in the silence, watching the sun drop, swayed by a gust of howling wind, suddenly, a booming voice split the air.

“Gwendolyn, I call for you!” came the voice, echoing off the

Canyon walls.

They all turned and looked at each other, baffled, then they all looked up, as one, and as they did, Gwendolyn could see where the voice was coming from. A chill went through her.

Andronicus.

There he was, surrounded by hundreds of his men, leaning out over the edge of the Canyon, looking down at her with a triumphant smile on his face.

"Gwendolyn, ruler of the Western Kingdom of the Ring, it is only you left now. King's Court is no more. The McClouds are my prisoners. It is only you left who dares defy me."

He paused.

"Despite what you have heard about me, I am not a savage. In fact, I am a most reasonable man. You fought bravely here today. Better than I had expected. And for that, I commend you. And for that, I wish to reward you. I can use valuable commanders like you in my armies, and I can use valuable soldiers like the Silesians.

"I never keep captives alive. But on this day, because of your bravery, I will make an exception. If you surrender to me, you personally, then I will spare your entire city from destruction. I will let everyone live, including your soldiers. I will even free each one of you. You will live in peace in my Empire, and I will leave Silesia alone.

"All I ask in return is that you swear allegiance to me. That you vow to serve me, to be a ruler under my command. I will treat you justly and fairly. You will be given any position you choose at my court. Surely it is a small price to pay—your personal sacrifice for the good of your nation.

"It is a kind and generous offer. Be wise, and accept it, on behalf of the thousands of souls around you. Look around you, see their faces. They are alive. If you defy me, they will face the wrath of the great Andronicus.

"Do not think too long. If I do not have your answer in the morning, I will rain fire on you unlike any you have ever seen. And by the time of the second sunset tomorrow, the legend of Silesia will be no more. Not even in the history books, which I will destroy."

Finally, Andronicus' voice stopped booming. It echoed briefly on the wind, then disappeared, retreating back to wherever it come from. As she looked up, he and his men retreated from the upper landing, disappearing from view.

Gwen turned and looked at the others, who all looked back at her, wide-eyed in surprise.

"Don't do it," Srog said gravely.

"You cannot trust him," Kendrick said.

“It is a false offer,” Steffen said.

“I would never have you serve him to save my soul,” Kolk said.

“Now would I,” Kendrick said.

Gwendolyn stood there, thinking. She knew Andronicus was not be trusted. Yet his words seemed genuine. And what choice did they have, really? As he said, if they refused, they would all be dead. She knew that herself. If not by his hand, then by some other way.

“I would gladly go into his servitude to spare the lives of all of you,” she said. “I feel it is an offer that I should accept.”

“You cannot my lady!” Kendrick called out. “I will not hear of it!”

“I would never have you sacrifice on my behalf!” Srog said. “I would rather go down fighting.”

“Is life that precious to you?” Brom asked.

“Not my life,” she answered. “But yours. All of yours. It would be selfish for me to reject it and have you all die.”

“Your honor is at stake!” Srog said.

“We have fought honorably,” she said. “The only one that will be in servitude is myself.”

“Your servitude is one too many,” Kendrick said. “It is not fair for you to sacrifice for all of us.”

“I am with Kendrick,” Srog said.

“So am I,” echoed the others.

“We will not let you go, my lady,” Steffen said. “We are all for one and one for all.”

A cheer arose among the men. She was touched by their loyalty. Yet the weight of Andronicus’ offer sat heavily on her shoulders. Her life for everyone else’s. It was something she would gladly give.

* * *

Gwendolyn stood alone, on the edge of Canyon Point, watching the last light of day cast a pall over the Canyon. It was the most beautiful sunset of her life, sparkling in the swirling mist, a flaming red which seemed to set the world on fire. It was somber and fatalistic. It matched her mood.

As she watched it, a part of her felt she was watching the last sunset of her life. Especially since she had, finally, come to a decision.

Gwendolyn had walked through the camp, had looked closely at the faces of all the men and women and children, the young soldiers—had seen all the aspiration, all the hope, in their eyes; they looked at her as if she held some long lost answer, as if she were their savior. It struck her that she had been given a chance, a unique ability at a unique moment in time to save these people. Her life for theirs. It

would be a great honor. Maybe she had been put here, in this time and place for just this reason, for just this one moment in time, for this decision. Maybe that was why she had been meant to rule—to make this one decision that would save thousands of lives.

Gwendolyn had made up her mind. She knew what she would do. Not what her advisors would do, not what her father would do, not what Kendrick would do. But what *she* would do. And that's all that mattered now.

At first dawn, when it was still dark, when there was no one around to stop her, she would go up there. Alone. She would surrender herself to Andronicus. She would agree to his terms, serve him, and give herself up for the greater good.

As Gwendolyn stood there, looking out at her last sunset as a free woman, she thought of Thor. She reached down and felt her stomach, and thought of their child. She wanted this child to live. For this child, if for no one else, she wanted to spare more bloodshed. She might be a servant to Andronicus, but this child would be free.

Gwendolyn looked out and had to admit that a part of her hoped for Thor to appear, to swoop down with the Sword and rescue her from all this. She would give anything, and her heart pounded at the thought.

But deep down she knew it was just a dream. Thor was gone, far away from here. She was all alone. It was meant for her to stand alone, as her own woman. As the woman her father had expected her to be. This was what being a ruler meant, she finally understood. To be surrounded by people—and yet, to be utterly alone.

"Not all dreams are meant to be fulfilled," came a voice.

Gwendolyn looked over to see Argon standing there, beside her, staring out at the sunset. She felt numb to the world, and a part of her was not even surprised to see him. Little mattered to her anymore now, since her mind had been made up. She faced the sunset with him.

"You come at a time when I no longer need your counsel," she said to him.

"I have not come to give you counsel," he said. "But to pay my respects. I had not seen your decision coming. So brave. Your father would be proud. You are the finest of the MacGils."

"Is that why you have come?" she asked, sensing there was something more.

"No," he answered. "I have also come to say goodbye."

She turned and looked at him, but he continued to stare out at the Canyon.

"Are you leaving us?" she asked, struck with fear. But then she was struck with an ever great fear: "Or is it I who is leaving you?"

Argon stared, expressionless, and would not answer.

"I suppose once I am a subject to Andronicus, you shall have a new MacGil ruler to counsel soon enough," she said.

He shook his head.

"Times are shifting," he said.

Gwendolyn was suddenly burning with a desire to know.

"Just tell me one thing," she pleaded. "Thor? Is he safe? Is he alive?"

She cared not for her safety anymore, but only for his.

"He is alive, yes."

She stared at him.

"You do not answer if he safe," she pressed.

Argon remained silent, not responding. Her heart was breaking.

"Can you save him?" she pleaded. "From whatever peril he is in? Please. I will give you anything. Can you keep him alive?"

Argon turned and stared at her, and his eyes burned right through her.

"I have already saved Thorgrin once. For you. And now your fate demands something in return."

Argon took three steps forward and laid a hand on her shoulder, and it burned right through her, feeling as if she was touched by the sun.

"You have done the gods proud," he said. "Always there will be a spot of honor reserved for you."

Just as Gwendolyn was about to pull away from his burning grasp, suddenly he disappeared.

Gwen turned and looked everywhere, but saw no trace of him. She was alone again up there, on the edge of the rock, more alone than she had ever been in her life.

She looked up at the Canyon wall rising to the upper city, and knew what she needed to do.

It was time to take the first step.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Erec braced himself as he lay there, defenseless, and the creature prepared to bring his claws down for his face. Images flashed through his mind as he prepared to meet his death—of his time as a boy, his days in the Legion, his life as a knight—and none flashed through his mind so strongly as that of Alistair. He had only one regret in life as he prepared to meet his death: not having more time to spend with her.

But as the creature brought the stone down, suddenly something happened. An intense light shone through the air, and the creature went flying back, knocked off its feet as an orb of light hit him in the chest and knocked him halfway across the battlefield.

Erec blinked several times, confused, not understanding what had just happened.

Another orb of light flew across the battlefield, and then another, and the creatures went flying in every direction, clearing a safe perimeter around him.

Erec turned and looked up and saw, standing over him, Alistair.

To his shock, he saw her holding out a palm, from which were radiating the orbs of light. Her light-blue eyes were aglow and she looked other-worldly, angelic, with her long blonde hair falling down towards him.

He did not know what to think.

Erec scrambled to his feet and stood at her side as she continued casting orbs at all the creatures on the battlefield, saving his friend Brandt right before a creature sliced him in half. Within moments a wave of destruction spread across the field, all the creatures hurling through the air.

The creatures who were not yet hit looked at them with a new fear and began to back away warily, then all turned and ran.

Erec turned and looked at Alistair with a whole new appreciation and sense of wonder. Did this have to do with the secret of her birth? Who was she, really? How did she have these powers? And why had she kept it a secret?

He could barely get out the words, his throat dry, as he turned to her. He was almost afraid to ask the question:

“Who are you?”

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

As the first sun broke over the Canyon, showering it with the most magnificent sunrise Gwendolyn had ever seen, filling the universe with red and orange hues, swirling clouds of mist, Gwen climbed the spiral staircases, up flight after flight, feeling as if she were climbing her way to heaven. She trembled inwardly and her heart pounded with anxiety, her legs growing heavier with each step. She had never felt more alone since she had begun her trek and left the comfort of her family, her army, her people, everything she knew and held dear.

She prepared to face Andronicus alone, to give herself over to his service, for the sake of her people and everyone she loved. It was the loneliest walk of her life, and she forced herself to go quickly, not wanting to think about it. If she thought it over too carefully, she was afraid she might turn back.

Gwen reached the final landing before the top, and encountered several Silesian soldiers, all snapping to attention, surprised by her presence. They saluted her.

"My lady," one of them said. "What are you doing up here? Is everything okay?"

She cleared her throat.

"All is well," she said, trying to mask her fear, trying to sound confident.

"Where are you going, my lady?" another asked.

"To the top," she answered.

The soldiers all exchanged a look of fear.

"The top, my lady?" one asked. "You know that Andronicus's army awaits up there."

She nodded.

"I know, too well. Now, please excuse me."

The soldiers looked at themselves in hesitation and confusion, and for a moment it seemed as if they might not let her pass; but then they deferred, and finally stepped aside.

As she walked past them, Gwen turned and faced them, remembering that they were all looking to her as their ruler.

"You have all done a magnificent job," she said. "I thank you for your service."

"My lady," one of the guards said, clearing his throat, looking gravely concerned. "If I may say, whatever it is that you are about to do, you needn't do it. All of us are ready to fight to the death for you."

She smiled back at him.

"I know you are," she answered. "And that is precisely why I am

doing this."

Without another word, Gwen turned and made her way alone up the final flight of steps, circling and circling, until she finally reached the uppermost level. She stood there, in the field of spikes, all sticking straight up into the sky, her last protection from the hordes of Empire, and walked over to the small platform in the middle and pulled on a heavy rope.

As she pulled, slowly, one pull a time, the platform raised, lifting her higher and higher above the spikes. With each pull, she felt her heart sinking, felt the anticipation of what could be her near death.

Finally she reached the top, above the spikes, and took a step out, onto the landing of upper Silesia. Standing there were dozens of Empire soldiers, who all turned and looked at her, eyes wide in shock. They stood there, gaping, unsure what to do.

Gwen took several proud steps forward, raising her chin and chest, realizing she represented the Ring. Everything she did reflected on her people, and she was determined to be brave and strong.

She looked for the most important-looking soldier she could find, and stepped to him and stared coolly back.

"Bring me to Andronicus," she commanded, using her most authoritative voice.

The Empire soldiers all looked at each other, dazzled, as if they'd seen a ghost appear in their midst.

Then, finally, the lead soldier nodded back. He turned and walked alongside her, and several soldiers fell in behind them.

The group of them marched, Gwen's heart pounding, crossing through the inner courtyard of Silesia. Gwen's heart broke at the site: it was destroyed, ravaged, burnt to embers, and now filled with thousands of Empire soldiers, milling about. As they marched through, all the soldiers on either side of her jumped to their feet, staring at Gwendolyn as if she were an animal in a zoo, as if she were a lamb being led to slaughter.

Gwen's heart swelled with increasing anxiety. It was too late to turn back now. Now, she was entirely at their mercy.

She prayed to God that she had made the right decision, was doing the right thing. She prayed that Andronicus would indeed honor his word.

A murmur spread throughout the camp, as they all marched out the city gate, and into the huge camp beyond the walls. Gwen was awe-struck at the site: hundreds of thousands of Empire soldiers were camped as far as the eye could see. They all turned and stood and stared at Gwen's arrival—and a great murmur arose amongst the soldiers.

Gwen was led across the remains of the drawbridge, and towards

a huge black tent pitched in the center of the soldiers, which she assumed was Andronicus' camp.

As they neared it, suddenly its flaps opened, and out of it emerged, ducking low, then raising his head high, Andronicus, wearing a black cape, no shirt, and his necklace of shrunken heads. She could see a new addition to it—the head of Lord Kultin, Gareth's pit-bull. She tried to look away.

Gwen walked as confidently as she could up to Andronicus. He wore a huge, triumphant smile. He was more beast than man, towering twice as large as any man she'd ever met, and with his long fangs and claws, it was hard for her to believe that he walked on two legs.

"Well well, my little lamb," he said to her, his deep voice snarling and booming in his chest. "You have taken me up on my offer after all."

The camp grew silent, as Gwendolyn cleared her throat.

"You vowed not to harm any of my people, or myself, and to let us live in freedom," she said, "if I would swear allegiance and enter your service. It is an offer I am prepared to accept."

His grin widened as his eyes twinkled down at her.

"You are very brave," he said. "You are willing to sacrifice yourself for your people. A very noble trait, indeed. You were wise to accept my offer. You can begin by kneeling before me and taking the Empire vow of allegiance."

The idea of kneeling before this monster and vowing allegiance to him tore Gwen up inside. Every muscle in her body screamed at her not to. But she forced herself to think of her people down below, of the suffering they would endure if she did not, and slowly, she willed her knees to bend, and took a knee before him.

"Bow your head," came the harsh voice of Andronicus' attendant.

Slowly, Gwendolyn lowered her head.

"Repeat after me," the attendant said. "I Gwendolyn, daughter of King MacGil, ruler of the Western Kingdom of the Ring…."

"I Gwendolyn, daughter of King MacGil, ruler of the Western Kingdom of the Ring…."

"Do hereby acknowledge that the great Andronicus is the one and only ruler of the universe…."

"Do hereby acknowledge that the great Andronicus is the one and only ruler of the universe…."

"That there has never been any greater, and never will be…."

"That there has never been any greater, and never will be…."

"And that I shall forever swear my loyalty to him."

As she spoke these last words they nearly stuck in her throat, and she felt a sense of nausea spread through her. She paused, wondering

if she could go through with it.

"And that I shall forever swear my loyalty to him."

She did it. She managed to get them out. Finally, it was done. She raised her head, looking up at Andronicus.

A great rumble arose from inside Andronicus' throat, like a purring sound. It was the sound of satisfaction.

"Very good," he said. "Very good indeed. You will make a most obedient subject. Now, you can rise."

Gwendolyn stood, and stared back at him coldly.

"And now you can let my people go," she said.

Andronicus's smile widened, as he reached up and fingered his necklace of shrunken heads.

"Well yes, about that," he began. "You see, sometimes I enjoy being honest. And sometimes I take great pleasure out of a lie. In this case, I'm sorry to say, it is the latter. I promise many things. Some things I keep, and some things I do not. And I am afraid you caught me on the wrong day."

Gwendolyn's heart began to pound. Inside, she screamed at herself. How could she have been so stupid?

"Your people," Andronicus continued, "well, I may not kill all of them, because of what you've done here today. But I will kill a great deal of them. And the rest I will enslave. I'm afraid they won't know what freedom is anymore. But then again, few people do."

He sighed.

"And as for you my dear," he said, "you should know that there are no positions of honor in my ranks. There are no leaders but me, and all those who are slaves to me are slaves. Including you."

Andronicus nodded and two soldiers rushed forward and grabbed her arms roughly.

"Let me go!" Gwen screamed, struggling. "You promised. You promised! Where is your honor?"

Andronicus laughed heartily.

"Honor?" he asked. "That is something I lost long ago. And I am so glad I did. I can't think of how many battles I would have lost without it."

His laughter died down.

"I'm afraid, my dear, that an example must be made of you. A particularly brutal example. You see, it is the only way that anyone who dares to defy me will learn."

Andronicus turned.

"MCCLOUD!" he shrieked.

From out of the ranks, to Gwendolyn's horror, there emerged the elder King McCloud, his face disfigured, half of it branded, marked by a huge burn mark with the emblem of Andronicus' Empire.

“It is time we teach this MacGil girl a lesson,” Andronicus said. “I would do it myself, but I get more pleasure from watching my enemies torture each other. In fact, is one of my greatest hobbies.”

“I will do anything you say, my lord,” McCloud said humbly to him.

“I know that you will,” Andronicus sneered back coldly. “You are going to have your way with this woman. Maybe you’ll get lucky and she will bear you a son. And I shall watch it all.”

A huge smiled crossed McCloud’s face, as he looked Gwen up and down as if she were his prey.

“It will be my pleasure, my lord,” McCloud said.

Gwendolyn screamed and struggled as McCloud charged her. She managed to break the grasp of the two soldiers—and turned and ran.

But she did not get very far. She had only gone a few feet when McCloud tackled her from behind, sending her flying, face-down to the ground, laying on top of her, knocking the wind out of her.

“NO!” she screamed, flailing.

But he was too strong for her. Soon his thick, rough hands were tearing at her clothes, and she felt the cold winter breeze sting her bare skin.

She heard the cheers of all of Andronicus’s men, and she screamed and screamed, struggling with every she had, wishing and praying that she were anywhere else. Somewhere, high overhead, she could have sworn she heard Estopheles, circling, screeching.

She closed her eyes, trying to make it all go away, imagining herself someplace, anywhere else. She imagined herself with Thor. With their child. In a field of summer flowers. In a paradise far, far away from the horrors of this world.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Thor stood alone in a vast field of scarlet flowers, lit by a blood red sunset. Over his head, somewhere high up, circled Estopheles, screeching. Up ahead, in the distance, there was a lone figure, lying limp in the grass. He could not tell who it was.

Thor walked towards it, his heart pounding as he went. The sky darkened with each step, and he felt an increasing sense of foreboding. Something inside told him it was the body of someone he loved.

As he approached, he could tell, from the flowing white lace spilled on the ground, that it was a woman. He saw her long, blonde hair, spilling out around her shoulders, with dread, and before he reached her, he knew who it was.

Gwendolyn.

Thor reached out with a trembling hand, grabbed her shoulder, and slowly turned her over, afraid to see what he might find. He was breathless at the site.

There Gwendolyn lay, her body covered in blood, not moving.

Thor began to weep uncontrollably, unable to stop himself. He leaned down, scooped her up in his arms, stood, and leaned back and shouted to the heavens.

"NO!" Thor shouted.

His cry soared up, echoing, reaching to the very heavens, as he held her limp, in his arms, the love of his life. The one woman who had meant more to him than anyone he had ever known. The woman he had planned on marrying. Somehow, dead. And he not there to save her.

"NO!" he shrieked again.

Thor's cry was met by a screech, as Estopheles circled and swooped down, claws out, right for his face.

Thor woke breathing hard, sitting straight up, looking all around, his heart slamming in his chest. Disoriented, he had a hard time discerning what was real, where he was.

Thor gradually realized that he was still in the boat, that he had fallen asleep in it—that all his Legion brothers had. The whole group of them were lying there, sleeping, as the boat slowly drifted down the river, carried on the slow current. He tried to remember, wondering how long they had been sleeping, how far they had drifted, where they were going. He felt as if they had been on this journey forever.

Thor took a deep breath, thinking of his dream, of Gwendolyn, trying to shake the awful image. It had seemed so real. Too real. The image terrified him.

He knew it was just a dream, yet at the same time he sensed that it was more than that. He sensed, in every fabric of his body, that she was in danger. That something horrible had happened to her.

It tore him up inside. More than ever he wanted to jump from the boat and run to her, to rescue her from whatever it was.

But he was a world away, and there was nothing he could do. He had never felt more helpless. A part of him hated himself for going on this quest. Should he have stayed behind?

Thor sat up straighter, and Krohn sat up beside him, whining, leaning his head into Thor's chest as Thor stroked him. Krohn kept whining, and Thor knew that Krohn sensed it, too, that Krohn, too, knew that something had happened to Gwendolyn. After all, Krohn was almost as attached to her as Thor was.

Thor felt a pit in his stomach that would not go away. He felt as if he had abandoned her in her time of need.

Thor looked up and saw yet another breaking dawn here on this side of the world; it broke as a day of gloom. There was no sun to be seen anywhere, only thick black clouds, with a muted light struggling to appear through them. They floated past vast stretches of wasteland, nothing but those dead black trees everywhere, those eerie birds, staring back, watching them. Apparently they did not sing in the morning. Instead, they watched them silently, their glowing eyes moving slowly, following the tides of the boat.

Thor looked straight ahead, and as he did, he was surprised to see that the river was coming to an end. In a few feet, their boat slammed into land, startling him, and waking the others.

The others all sat up with a jolt, one by one, and looked around, startled. Without waiting, Thor gained his feet, walked to the front of the boat and jumped onto dry land, Krohn on his heels. The other boys followed him.

"Where are we?" Reece asked, jumping onto dry land beside him, looking around in wonder.

"Is this where the river ends?" O'Connor asked.

"I have no idea," Thor said.

The three brothers jumped off the boat, too, Drake holding out the map and looking around.

"Is this where your golden map has lead us?" Indra asked sarcastically.

"We are exactly where we are supposed to be," Drake answered defensively.

"And where is that, exactly?" she said. "In the middle of nowhere?"

"Actually, our destination is close," Dross said, leaning in. "According to this map, it's not much farther now."

“Follow us,” Drake said, setting off with his two brothers.

“I don’t like this place,” Conval said to Conven, standing close.

Thor was just thinking the same thing. It was hard to see far ahead, with the thick fog rolling in and out. He could only catch glimpses of the trees, of a barren wasteland.

After trekking for some time, finally, the fog cleared, and Thor spotted a huge, circular clearing open up before them. The landscape changed abruptly from dirt to a purple grass, as if one land was being demarcated by the other. It was as if they stood at an intersection: in one direction was a land of green, in another a yellow desert.

“What is this place?” Elden asked.

“It looks like a crossroads of sorts,” Reece said.

“The crossroads of the dead,” Indra said. “From here the land leads to three terrains. It is the edge of the underworld.”

“Now what?” Thor asked, turning to Drake.

But something strange happened: as Thor turned to look at Drake, he saw the three brothers suddenly retreating, taking several steps backwards, away from the others.

Before Thor could process what was happening, the fog lifted again, and he suddenly saw, bearing down on them, a hundred Empire soldiers.

Before Thor could reach to draw his sword, he felt himself pounced upon from behind, grabbed by several soldiers and slammed down to the floor. All around him, his Legion brothers were ambushed, too.

In the blink of an eye, they were captured and bound, rendered helpless. They had been setup.

Everyone, except for Drake and Dross and Durs. The Empire did not touch them.

The three brothers came forward and stood over Thor. All with malicious smiles across their faces.

Thor could not believe it. He had been betrayed. By his own brothers.

“I trusted you,” Thor said to Drake.

Drake smiled and shook his head.

“You never had good judgment,” he responded.

“But why?” Reece asked. “Why would you betray us? Your own Legion brothers?”

“You are not our brothers,” Dross answered, then turned to Thor. “And especially you. We have waited half our lives to see you dead. And now your day has come.”

“Say goodbye, little brother,” Durs said.

He drew his sword with a distinctive ring, as the Empire soldiers held Thor down tight.

Thor tried to struggle, but it was useless. There was something about these ropes that nullified his power. He could not even muster the strength to squirm.

He had nothing left to do but watch helplessly as Durs stepped forward and raised his sword high, aiming for Thor's exposed neck. Thor knew that his time had come.

And he had but one wish left in the world: if only he could see Gwendolyn again.

About Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 Bestselling author of THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, a young adult series comprising eight books, which has been translated into six languages.

Morgan is also author of the #1 Bestselling THE VAMPIRE LEGACY, a young adult series comprising two books and counting.

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